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P E R I L

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LLOYD OSBOURNE

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THE MOTOR MANIACS
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THREE SPEEDS FORWARD
THE TIN DISKERS
SCHMIDT
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THE ADVENTURER
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PERIL

With Robert Louis Stevenson

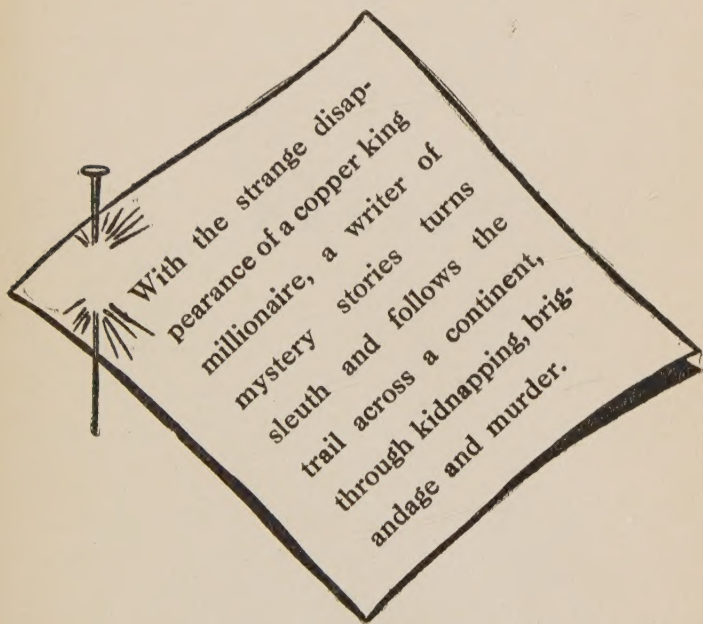
THE WRONG BOX
THE WRECKER
THE EBB TIDE

Plays with Austin Strong

THE LITTLE FATHER OF THE WILDERNESS
THE EXILE

P E R I L

by LLOYD OSBOURNE




PUBLISHED FOR
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P E R I L



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Chapter I

HAL CURWEN was hunched up at his desk, busily writing; beside him on an ash tray was a tumble of cigarette ends, several of them still alight, and the May sunshine, streaming through the windows, was also dimmed by tobacco smoke. Lexington Avenue rumbled below; within was the perfect peace of a male establishment limited to one and dedicated to the production of fiction. Not that it had the squalor so often associated with the solitary writer; Hal Curwen was a very neat man, always said he was much too nervous to be anything else, and that it disturbed him to see a book upside down or the pale cold fat of a forgotten casserole. He was a fair, slight man of thirty-six, with candy-colored hair and an attractive boyishness due to his inability to take himself seriously. He always thought it a miracle to be handed real money for an untidy bunch of manuscript and shrank like a fugitive from justice when his name stared at him from ash cans:

HAL CURWEN'S THRILLING NEW SERIAL

**THE MAN HUNT
THE MAN HUNT
THE MAN HUNT
THE MAN HUNT**

NEXT SUNDAY'S CLARION

It had not always stared at him from ash cans, which please understand is Fame. He had begun originally as an essayist and poet and had been extremely happy with a success which brought him much more praise than bread

and butter. You can be quite a "coming" essayist and poet and yet have to scrimp damnably to buy an overcoat. But Hal never dreamed he was not the most fortunate of men. Could he not print anything he wrote? Did he not make enough for his modest wants? Was he not loved by a succession of charming women? What more could any poet want?

So he fluttered from flower to flower, petted, soothed, and cooed over till Tragedy suddenly took him by the ear and married him to Claudia Marshall. It had all been very bewildering; Tragedy is always bewildering. Looking back it did not seem as though he had had any voice in the matter at all: two or three calls, a poem in place of the roses he could not afford, a hand-holding tea in a dark corner of a tea room, and then somehow he was a captive of the Riffs—with people clapping him on the back and telling him he was a lucky fellow.

In dazed simplicity he thought he was, all these loud, strident people were so sure of it; and there was something so cowering in their money—in their cars and thick carpets. They were fearfully rich Riffs, you know: Claudia had twenty-eight thousand dollars a year of her own which she regarded merely as pin money; and she was extraordinarily elegant and pretty, with a delicious allure; far too good for him, in fact. What penniless young man could have had the slightest apprehension?

They were married at the Church of the Heavenly Rest with all the tribal pomp and dignitaries. This nightmarish experience was followed by a distressingly smart little house on Madison Avenue. Servants, dressing for dinner, social position; a whole horrid ritual; Riffs whose names had to be remembered; a surpassingly luxurious study where he often meditated blowing his brains out. The worst of all perhaps was the cutting off of his old friends. Claudia, who was no fool, contrived by degrees to make

them all walk the plank, and so cleverly that often there was not even a splash to mark their disappearance. Yet she had her points, too. Her cleverness was foursquare. She respected his ill-paid authorship, squashed her parents when they wanted to put him in business, had her moments of girlish tenderness that served but to rivet his chains the tighter.

It lasted a little over two years. Sweet little Frances Anne arrived, enmeshing him in fresh loyalties and making him more of a captive than ever. Then suddenly, as he seemed as fixed as a fly in amber, Claudia blew everything to the winds and left for Paris with the child, announcing she was sick of marriage and sick of him. For a while Hal was terribly conscience-stricken; blamed himself entirely; realized how his moodiness, his scarcely veiled discontent must have worn on this young and ardent woman. He followed her in the steerage, having no money for anything better—always having refused to avail himself of hers. He was full of contrition and abasement; probably he cared more for her then than at any time since he had known her. She was such a correct kind of girl—so faultless in the social observances—that he could appreciate the agonies this flight must have cost her. His hands clenched in tense resolutions; an intolerable pathos enfolded him. Had not her young life been confided to him, and had he not failed her? Abominably, in fact. Let her down—as they say—betrayed her?

It was in this humor that he sought her at the Ritz, determined to humble himself, to implore her forgiveness, to tell her how those days in the steerage had revealed his own egoism to himself. He had been spiritually purified; he came to her a deeply repentant man. In the pocket of his shabby coat there was even a poem on the subject that would have melted granite.

Expecting an emotional scene, it was no little shock to

find Claudia so calm. She greeted him with a tender dignity, gave him a cigarette, and said she was very glad to see him. "We can arrange this so much better ourselves," she remarked.

"Arrange what?" asked Hal, who wanted to get on with his repentance.

"My marrying Charlie Thorold," she said. "We have always cared for each other, and now that he is divorced I want to get free, too. We had an idiotic quarrel which landed him with Nina Buress and me with you, though there was not a day when we did not both regret it. Well, the only way to get out of a mess is to get out, and it is a comfort to think—whatever your faults are—that you are a gentleman, Hal."

Such was the preamble to a number of swift events—to narrate them would be tiresome—that put back Hal to where he had been before he ever met Claudia. The whole episode of his marriage, except for Frances Anne, was as expunged as though it had been wiped off a slate. But Frances Anne persisted and was the means of a peculiar change in his life. The right to have her for the half of every year was not much of a concession to a penniless man, and as Claudia remained in Europe it was virtually telling him he could not see his child again.

Hal showed an unexpected energy in meeting this situation. Leaving culture to shift for itself he wrote a detective novel called *Pushed to the Wall* that caused the intelligentsia to weep but which brought him in several thousand dollars. A second named *The Bleeker Street Crime* marked his real advent into this highly paid field. With his third, *The Man Hunt*, he became definitely a popular author, and able when he went abroad every summer to treat his little daughter like a princess. She would come to him with her governess and share an inordinately expensive month at the Lido. She was a loving little thing, and

always wept bitterly when she left, showered with gifts. Hal would weep too, and it was all so affecting and tender that he was repaid for a good deal of boredom—which even to himself he would not have admitted.

Such was his life, which he had allowed to become grayer than it ought. He still fluttered from flower to flower: women indeed were the joy of his existence, but he never involved himself too deeply. He said to himself they were all lovely tigresses, to be stroked and purred over but safer behind bars. Hal had no idea of opening any cage door; one experience had been enough. On his desk as a paper weight he had a small lump of amber with a fly in it. Once when temptation became well-nigh irresistible he carried it as a talisman. It was as steadying to him as a Bible to an ardent Christian.

He took his work with great seriousness. He became an indefatigable prowler after crime and criminals; studied the subject first hand, acquired an ever-growing library, filled scrapbooks. Crime is a vast subject, the prevention of crime is another; and there are the fascinating radiations of medical jurisprudence, handwriting, physical identification, and psychoanalysis. These were strange researches for a poet who had been merely looking for a short cut to make money. But there was something thorough in Hal; he did not know how to do things by halves.

But to return to that May morning with the sun filtering through the tobacco smoke on the bent shoulders and twisted legs of the author at work. As usual he had loathed beginning, and as usual he had soon become passionately absorbed; like the kitten he often compared himself with, whose head had to be pulled off to get it to the milk, and whose tail had to be pulled off to get it away. It was nearly noon; it was tail-pulling time; he had almost finished the thousand words he regarded as a good morning's work. Four discreet knocks at the door suddenly roused him from

the dream world in which he had altogether lost himself.

Damn, it was Nigma.

Then his impulsive resentment at being disturbed instantaneously changed to a tingle of delight.

Running to the door he eagerly opened it.

She stood on the threshold, panting a little from the three flights of stairs; a shadowy figure, young, erect, and with smiling dark eyes. Entering she was revealed as a vigorous young woman, beautiful only in her unassailable health, her fresh skin, her delicately intrepid air. She belonged to the new type of expensively educated young American women in whom femininity is guarded like a jewel; who can ride and swim and play games without impairing their essential charm; who can wear the appropriate clothes with elegance. Instead of the mannishness and aggressiveness that once went with advanced education, the present product is of a winning gentleness, with a sweet voice and a directness as disarming as a caress.

But Nigma would always have been a very attractive girl even if less money had been spent on her. Hal gazed at her in admiration; she was like a flower in her dewy freshness, a breath of spring itself. Laughingly he said something of the kind while she went to the windows in turn and energetically raised them as far as they would go.

"This terrible air," she protested. "You ought to wear a gas mask. Phew! I must wear one myself the next time I come."

"I have never believed in air," said Hal. "Air killed the Indians—weakened them, you know; all the fresh air races go down like ninepins before the superior whites who have been hermetically sealed for generations."

But Nigma, except for a disdainful quiver of her little nose, would not debate the matter. In a brisk and business-like way she pulled off her cloche hat and threw it on the

divan, smoothing her close-cropped hair with both hands. It was silky black and as glistening as sealskin, and it intensified the brilliancy of her complexion and her liquid brown eyes. Hal, slouching there with his hands in his pockets, felt the emanations of her intense vitality. The shabby little place always seemed to vibrate with her presence. Hal vibrated too, with an unreasoning happiness. Just to look at her was a delight.

"I took this away from a messenger boy and signed for it," she said, offering him a special-delivery letter. "I hope you don't mind—but I knew how you hated to be disturbed."

Hal scarcely regarded the letter, though he murmured some thanks. Had she brought him anything—that was the point?

She produced a few scribbled sheets from her bag, also a ten-dollar bill, which she laid on his desk. Hal looked at it darkly. However, as she absolutely refused to be his pupil on any other terms he had long given up demurring. He compared it to the scimitar in the Beautiful Persian's bed; no matter how close they sat correcting her manuscript there was always that ten-dollar bill between them. Maddening! And she added insult to injury by saying he ought to be thankful she was a safe tigress—he had confided his views on women to her—and that she would never lay a paw on him except in a spirit of kindness. But Hal didn't want a safe tigress, not in Nigma, at least, and when he yearned for a wild and thirsting one he was told coldly that he was inconsistent.

"Well, what is it about this time?" Hal was flattening out the six pages of manuscript.

"Just a walk down Park Avenue before breakfast."

Hal was teaching her to write. He had original views on the subject. Observation was the essential of writing; observe, observe, observe; form, style, expression were all

secondary. If there was very little human to note, there was always the weather. Nigma, as a literary pupil, was supposed to take an occasional walk alone; and then, with as little intermediate delay as possible, was supposed to describe it on paper. She had little natural talent for writing; she improved slowly and arduously. As Hal said woundingly, she fell like a little elephant into every pitfall along the way. But she was in earnest, and that seemed to atone for everything. She had been coming to him now, at irregular intervals, for a year and a half.

Hal was knitting his brows, preparatory to beginning, when she reminded him of the special-delivery letter.

"Oughtn't you to open it?" she asked.

Hal did so, though not very willingly. It was from Mildred and probably wanting him to do something. That was the worst of excessively kind people like Mildred who thought all their friends were the same and were always goading them into generous actions. Probably a starving Russian sculptor or something, or a young poet nobody would print. Women again—another form of tigress—servitude. Yet he adored Mildred. He would go to heaven on the kind actions Mildred had compelled him to do.

HAL DARLINGEST:

Oh, *why* haven't you a telephone? And the trouble this causes your friends! I almost think I must make my love dependent on your installing one. You say it would annoy you; well, it annoys everybody—only life without it is hell. And here you are forcing me to dictate all this when I ought to be selling an Italian painted bed. I wish you could see the lady that wants it; she is painted too—in gobs—but not so decoratively. However, I will turn away my head, and leave my trust in God and the new *vendeuse*—such a frizzly little ass. Where do these idiots come from? Do they fly off ponds like mosquitoes and then descend in brainless swarms on the busy marts of trade?

Well, this is all a preamble to something very important. *Burningly important.* Dined night before last with Aneka Van Vleet. Thirty people; pre-war; *la haute élégance*. Very smart really; all the best people—including poor little me in the same mauve that always figures so prominently in the Night Life of Zion. Among others were the Reardons; he is one of the copper multimillionaires, you know; has a fabulous place on Long Island. Perhaps forty-seven, or a young fifty; honest roughneck with sparkling Irish eyes, and almost whiffily hundred per cent. he-man. With him an incongruous wife he married a year ago in Paris; exquisite, slender, European fashion plate; English overlaid with French, and with cameo profile that always makes her talk to you sideways. Irritating, not my type at all, but extraordinarily effective, and determined to land in New York society, dragging hubby by the ear. With her a daughter of nineteen or twenty, very pretty too; an unaffected, shy girl with the loveliest blue eyes you ever saw. Didn't pay much attention to them—the Reardons, I mean; that kind of Long Island has no sex-appeal for me. But afterward, waiting her chance, Mrs. Reardon pounced on me. Well, with such frankness that I knew right off her aristocratic pose was not a fake. Really smart English people don't know what reticence means, regard even fig leaves as an affectation. Asked if I would find a suitable husband for her daughter, dowry of two hundred and fifty thousand in cash; admitted frankly she wanted to get rid of her. The old story, you know; the lovely mother cramped by a lovely daughter. Would I not help her? Very plain hints that it would be remunerative. And of course a whole cascade about my being a perfect dear, and how I must come and stay with them at Idle Wyld. Yes, that's its awful name—"y" and all! And in a kind of way I took it on—but more as a means of getting her to my shop than anything else.

But really, Hal, you might look her over; Felice Hamilton, I mean—the daughter. She is a sweet lovely unspoiled little thing and as fragrant as a flower. Have invited them to a little party, the day after to-morrow, 9:30. Ring up from the club, and tell me you are coming. You *must*. My heart is set on it.

MILDRED.

Have just opened this to add that Mrs. Reardon has just gone after buying my best *t'ang* horse for sixteen hundred dollars. And with a delicate reference, as fine as mist, to better things in the future if I am successful. I don't know whether to consider it all odious, or take it as a joke? But anyway, come, if only for your own amusement.

M.

Chapter II

HAL was so much amused by Mildred's letter that he had to read it aloud to Nigma, chuckling as he did so. The lesson was temporarily put by.

"And what are you going to do?" asked the practical young woman beside him.

"Leave word at the club that I am out of town for a week and then telephone the appropriate regrets. Send some flowers too, of course; every crime can be wiped out with flowers; if Cain had only done that with Abel's widow there would have been none of the world-wide unpleasantness afterward."

"She's awfully in love with you, isn't she?" remarked Nigma, who had been scrutinizing the letter carefully.

Hal was scandalized.

"Mildred and her husband are the two best friends I have in the world," he said. "She is one of those women who redeem the whole race of tigresses. My emotion for her is almost religious in its intensity."

Nigma pursued this phase of the matter no further.

"And she keeps a shop?"

"Yes, an old furniture shop on Thirty-ninth Street; small, but all very good, and does decorating too. Writes with authority on artistic subjects. How to tell a real wormhole from a shotgun wormhole, you know. Her husband, Jimmy Hare, is assistant business manager of the *Evening Chronicle*. They have a microscopic house on East Nineteenth Street."

"Why on earth don't you go?" said Nigma, referring to the party. "It sounds most amusing—and then you could

tell me about it afterward." There was a touch of entreaty in her voice.

"What should I do with a girl with a quarter of a million dollars?" demanded Hal. "These rich girls aren't what they are represented; I know, because I married one. I am like the bus conductor who said that legs were nothing to him. Besides, I don't want to marry anybody—and being unable to say no, I would be invited out to the Idle Wyld place and get involved with people I detest. My religious veneration for Mildred does not prevent my realizing that sometimes she is a perfect idiot."

"It might lead to the cameo lady buying another *t'ang* horse," said Nigma, who had the tiger inability to give up anything she wanted. "Besides, if I were an author I would always try to meet unusual people, odd people. I am fascinated by the Reardons."

Hal meditated.

"You are right, Nigma," he said. "It is just my incredible laziness, and knowing that Mildred will invite so many people there will be no place to sit down except on ladies' laps. But you have pointed to the path of duty, and I will follow it to the bitter end."

As an afterthought he added: "I will get you an invitation and we'll both go!"

He could feel her almost imperceptible movement of resistance, and suddenly irritated by the persistent secret she made of herself, he turned half round and said: "Who the devil are you, Nigma?"

"You were not to ask that," she answered. "A bargain is a bargain."

"But after a year and a half?"

"There was no time limit, was there?"

He made a gesture of helplessness; that was always how it ended—his efforts to pierce the veil. She had been absolutely nameless till he had christened her Enigma,

which had gradually shortened itself to Nigma. He would have preferred Nigmadarling, but his efforts to use it had not been crowned with success. She had come to him out of nowhere, attracted apparently by an essay of his called "The Pursuit of Happiness," and had begged to be taught how to write. Sometimes two months would pass without a glimpse of her. Then there would be the four taps on his door and that intolerable ten-dollar bill with its killing effect on romance.

"I wonder what the little elephant has fallen into to-day," he said brutally, corrugating his brows and drawing the sheets toward him in no amiable frame of mind. Damn it, he had to earn his ten dollars if he took the skin off her back.

A handful came off at the fourth line. "The poor little man!" Hal could not do justice to it sitting down, had to rise to his feet repeating the phrase with withering contempt. The cheapness of it! The obviousness of it! The maudlin appeal to pity! The rubber-stamp pathos! And, my God, almost next to it was a rubber-stamp locution: "He bought her a motor!" Moaning aloud, he collapsed on his chair, a stricken man. Was it for this he had been expending the best months of his life? Had he not told her one million times . . . ? Dreadful little elephant! Didn't her ear tell her anything even if she had no sense in her head at all?

Luckily it did not proceed like this. The little elephant was good at weather, so good that she was commended. Had a knack, too, of picking up scraps of talk, had a real feeling for dialogue. Hal expatiated on the difficulty and artificiality of good dialogue, how it must be condensed, suggested, and given a wit it often did not possess in actual speaking. He was a master of his trade and an enthusiastic one. The lesson that had begun so badly ended with a stimulating feeling of achievement and comradeship.

As Nigma was replacing her hat on her sleek black head

she asked him not to forget his promise to go to Mildred's party.

"I will, if you will come back the next day and talk it over," said Hal. "I almost forget my love for you in two months; it is a dangerous way to treat a young affection; it might die of starvation in the meanwhile, and have to be taken out and dropped somewhere like a dead cat."

She smiled at him fondly; it was in that humor she liked him best.

"I am not always free," she said. "But I will come if I can."

With that she was gone, the dark corridor enfolding her.

Who was she? What did she mean by not being free? Hal, somewhat moodily asking himself these questions, walked to the windows and banged both shut.

There never was a girl in the world who seemed less married than Nigma. No, it could not be that. She was probably the daughter of a fashionable house, to whom visiting a young man alone in his rooms was a transcendent crime. It would certainly look frightful to any observing acquaintance.

Murmuring to himself that to the pure all things were impure he added as a sort of postscript that he must not forget that goddam party.

Of course, Mildred had invited everybody in New York; the tiny house bulged with people, and was positively apoplectic in its effort to swallow more. After you had thrown your coat and hat on a small mountain, wondering if you would ever see either again, you had to struggle up the stairs an inch at a time. It was just what Hal had expected—only worse. But you knew half the people you jostled, which was something, and had suffocating conversations on the way. But like all Mildred's parties it had a note of gaiety, all these swarming people were happy

to be there; that was its essential difference from the subway at the rush hour.

Mildred greeted him warmly; she knew his characteristics so well that she had hardly expected him, and her deep, musical voice showed her pleasure. She was about his own age and was one of those deceptively plain women whose beautiful natures shine through them; a tall, fair woman, with penetrating gray eyes, and of a mingled dignity and sweetness—a rare combination—that always made her an outstanding figure in any society. After a moment's conversation—no guest could expect more than a crumb of Mildred—Hal was slithered through the mob and introduced to Mrs. Reardon and Miss Hamilton.

Evidently a pleasant reception had been arranged for him; Mrs. Reardon sparkled at hearing his name and gave him a dazzling smile. She was a copper-haired blonde of a startling beauty and looked almost as young—and certainly a thousand times more enchanting—than, the slight young girl by her side, who shivered like a fawn and dropped her eyes in anguish at the ordeal of meeting Hal. As he bowed he thought he had never before seen such an exemplification of that trite phrase, the bloom of youth. Felice Hamilton was downy with youth; her physical refinement had the idealized quality that Leighton and Alma Tadema gave to their pictures. Her satiny skin, her lustrous golden brown hair, her eyes as blue as cornflowers, her exquisite rounded girlishness all appealed to a primitive instinct to throw her over your shoulder and make off with her before you could be speared. It was such young women Mahomet had in mind when he promised them in Paradise to his battling hordes.

Hal tried to make himself agreeable. But she was so shy and shrank so pitifully at every remark he addressed to her that he found it too distressing to continue. Her only form of response was to cast an affrighted glance at her mother,

who answered for her. This being so it seemed easier to carry on a conversation directly with Mrs. Reardon and abandon Felice altogether.

Mrs. Reardon's poise was unexceptionable; she was an accomplished woman of the world, and had all the little flattering arts of one who made a business of pleasing. Indeed she was so cooing, wheedling, and insincere, and made such play of her faultless profile and enticing bare shoulders that Hal's first impression was one of fascinated repulsion. She confessed in almost her first breath that she wrote poetry herself; it was the only way, was it not—no matter how poorly one did it—to invest a passing mood or thought with an aroma? Perfume it, so to speak. Powder it with sandalwood.

Encouraged, she recited in the most dulcet voice and in alternating shades of archness, passion, and despair several of her own poems in French. English was too matter-of-fact, was it not, for such delicate nuances of feeling? Hal had to admit *that* surely, though he was a famous American author. Hal admitted it, though demurring at this description of himself, and though he had gained very little from the poems save their trilling cadence, and the one word *amour*. The way Mrs. Reardon could enunciate *amour* made one feel that her poems were little masterpieces. The quality she gave that word, with her fine eyes meltingly on her listener and her mouth quivering with intensity, made the rest of the poem comparatively unimportant, especially to one who read French toilsomely with a dictionary and had to take a good deal on trust.

Attracted but not at all deceived, Hal noticed the filmy gradations by which he had been first flattered as a fellow poet himself, then very definitely engaged for a week-end at Idle Wyld which he had to struggle hard to leave undated, and then used by that dextrous brain as a means of information about the other guests. Among them were

a number of people of some social importance—apart from fashionable authors, actors, and portrait painters—and Hal was adroitly pumped as to their position, fortune, divorces, and general desirability as stepping-stones to society.

It was a thankful moment when others pushed him aside, for Mrs. Reardon was the cynosure of a great deal of attention, and he was introduced to Reardon himself as a gracious form of dismissal. It had been a little hard to do, since Reardon loomed more as a back than as an active participant in the foregoing conversation. He was a big man of about fifty, with a deeply furrowed face and a firmly cut mouth under a gray moustache; a stalwart, somewhat commonish man with deep-set eyes and a frank, engaging manner; second-growth Irish apparently, the type that has dominated America politically for sixty years.

Hal, detecting a fellowship of humor on a face seamed by half a lifetime in the wilds, felt an impulse of liking for Reardon, who shot out an enormous hand and said he was very glad to meet him. It was at that moment Hal was conscious of Felice watching them. Her face was transfigured as her glance rested on her stepfather's. It was suffused with tenderness, with adoration, with something indescribably moving and devoted. That Reardon could have engendered such a glance made Hal like him all the better. He was evidently one of those big-hearted men that children and dogs instinctively loved. Felice's glance fell like a benediction on their meeting.

"That Mildred has been telling me a lot about you," said Reardon, "and it is as favorable as though you were running for office and wrote it yourself."

Smiling, Hal murmured deprecations.

"Oh, I make allowances," said the big man genially. "No man was every really worth what a good woman thinks of him; but even after taking off fifty per cent. it

still leaves a lot. Tell me, laddie, do you often come to things like this?"

"Only when I can't help it," said Hal.

Reardon beamed; the fellowship was established.

"You are not *all* highbrow, then?" It was not a question, but more an affirmation of liking.

"Go to prize fights," said Hal, "and believe the only towns worth living in are wide open. You must not be prejudiced against me because I write books."

"Say, laddie, I like you," exclaimed Reardon. "If I could have had you in time out West I could have made a man of you."

He spoke as though Hal were about nine years old.

"Unfortunately I had to grow up without those refining influences," said Hal. "I was thrown early in life, defenseless except for my wits, among the brainy and cultured in the purlieus of a great city."

Reardon gazed at him quizzically, at first not comprehending, and then burst into a roar of laughter.

"Laddie, you are a feller after my own heart," he announced. "We have to wet this to make it binding; friends, you know. Is there any kind of bar in this establishment?"

"It is not worth the struggle to get there," said Hal. "It would be like trying to reach the lifeboat of a sinking ship, and would necessitate trampling on women and children. Some hero might shoot us, besides, for not leaving it to the weak and helpless, who of course ought to come first."

Reardon shook again. Somehow he gave the impression of not having laughed for a long time, and was enjoying it now extravagantly.

"This seems good for another hour at least," he said, looking about the room. "What's the matter with going down to my car and sampling some Randolph Club pre-war? Laddie, I would like to be good to you."

Laddie, nothing loath, accepted the invitation, registering a resolution not to return, and determining to send flowers to Mildred in the morning by way of a peace offering. After all, he had done his duty, and in going off with Reardon was he not continuing it?

Seated in the interior of a magnificent limousine, with the blinds pulled down, they shared an old Bourbon that would have melted the cockles of the hardest heart. The blandness of it, the silkiness of it, the warm fragrant reek of it—all was magically conducive to that new-found friendship. Hal found himself calling the big man Tim—apparently the T in John T. Reardon was for Timothy—and with every sip of Bourbon Tim seemed to him more original and amusing.

“Of course I don’t want to be masquerading here as a fellow with any bean,” said Tim, in the course of their discursive conversation. “Not your kind of bean, I mean, though my block ain’t to be despised neither in the mining business. To tell the truth, laddie, I have only read two books in my life—your kind of books—and never finished neither, though I was sick with the flu and stuck all alone in an Omaha hotel.”

“I hope my name wasn’t on either of them,” said Hal.

“I disremember,” returned Tim. “In fact it was only recent that I found out authors put their names on books, and you orter read them first—their names, you know.”

“It’s a kind attention,” said Hal, “and has the advantage of your knowing what author to avoid afterwards.”

“Well, my first effort was about a man and girl left alone on a boat, with enough to eat and all that, warm and comfortable, but not knowing each other from Adam. Had taken a positive dislike to each other in fact on the steamer before it sank. There was a third man on the boat, but as he was dead they hove him overboard—and there they were, just them two. And, laddie, it went on for days and

days and the author he evidently thought it was the nicest thing that ever happened. Now to me, who could not help seeing things as they would be, no po'try stuff, but just like it really happened to Bessie Jones and Elmer Tomkins, say—it seemed to me downright *horrible!* Gee, laddie, it wouldn't bear thinking about! No privacy, no nothing, you know; just them two under the sky and heaving in a twenty-foot boat. Sick as I was, and weaker nor a kitten, I slung it across the room."

"And the other?" asked Hal, glowing with a second nip of that glorious Bourbon.

Reardon wiped his lips with the back of his hand, and then continued.

"It started off fine—the lost mine of the Incas or something—and it kept me real excited till we got to the mine. What he didn't know about gold-mining would have filled a book! Such a goddam fool, laddie. And it was a quartz proposition, and apparently you chipped the nuggets off with a tomahawk, and carried them away in sacks! Sacks, laddie! And all them bygone tomahawks lying about dropped by the Incas, who had been toppled over by the Spaniards who then massacred one another at cards. Blamed if the cards weren't lying there mixed with bones and breastplates! Such almighty foolishness as never was heard outside a lunatic asylum—and me a mining man. And would you believe it, them cards were the cards of to-day, and not even Mex!"

Scorn could go no further. He glowered there, emitting clouds of smoke.

"It is no game for a fine young feller like you," Reardon went on after a pause. "And they tell me it don't even pay well. What do you make per book, laddie?"

"Twenty cents."

"Five to a good cigar! That ain't making a living; that is what I would call making a dying."

"Sorry it displeases you," said Hal, becoming a trifle restive. "Hope you will come to my funeral."

He felt the weight of Tim's big hand on his knee in an impulsive contrition.

"It's because I like you, laddie," he said. "It's because I would like to see you better yourself, and get into something worth while. This is just like an old mammy telling yarns to grown-up babies, and taking a collection afterwards of twenty cents per."

"I am perfectly happy as I am," said Hal. "In fact I am the only really happy person I know—and if that isn't making a success of oneself, what is? Are you so damned happy, Tim?"

Reardon looked confused; he was unprepared for such a thrust.

"I have everything I want," he said with a curious lack of conviction. "I am a rich man."

"Money isn't everything."

Reardon mused a moment and then admitted that it wasn't.

"That has been coming over me for some time," he added. "I was better off years ago when I was washing dirt in the Black Hills and owing more money than I ever could overtake."

He sighed.

"Them Black Hills was the worst fizzle I ever got into, laddie."

"That wasn't why you sighed, Tim."

"No, it wasn't. Will you have another?"

"No, thanks."

"Laddie, I have rubbed you up the wrong way about being a book writer, and now I haven't the nerve to rub you up about something else."

"Go ahead."

"You won't take it wrong? Sure?"

"Sure."

"There is something of the priest in you, laddie; something good and wise and helpful. I could very easy tell you a lot of things about myself that are locked in my heart."

He sighed again.

"You don't know me well enough," said Hal. "You would regret it afterwards, and anyhow it may be the Bourbon. I have been a father confessor too long and to too many people not to protect myself from their hating me afterwards."

An amazed expression passed over Reardon's face.

"Then other people have felt the same way about you? The same as I feel?"

"I have listened to more confidences than you could believe possible. I am loaded with enough TNT to blow up New York."

"And you have kept them?"

"The confidences? New York is still here, Tim. That ought to speak for itself. If there is one obligation of honor in the world it is surely that."

Tim, gazing moodily at the tip of his cigar, murmured an assent.

"I am in deep waters, laddie," he added. "Deeper than anybody could believe. Pardon me for going as far as that at this stage when we hardly know one another. But you do like me enough to follow it up, don't you? You will come and see me out there at Idle Wyld?"

"Sure, Tim."

Reardon rapped on the glass in front for the chauffeur to open the door. Descending they said good-night on the curb, the big man returning to the house while Hal, turning up his collar against the faint drizzle, walked away in the direction of the Broadway car.

It had been a strange evening.

Chapter III

IT WAS just like Nigma not to turn up next morning when he had been counting on it, and with such impatience that it had spoiled his morning's work. Hal was full of his experiences of the night before, brimming over with them, and it was not a little hard to hold them in. That was what always happened when you served women. He had gone to that party to please her, gone because he simply could not say no to her insistence, and this was how she had let him down.

He walked to the club a confirmed woman hater, scowling at the trim little flappers on Fifth Avenue, and glaring like an anarchist at the lovely beings that descended from luxurious cars. He would be a man's man henceforth, write scorching books that would make women wish they had never been born, go off to the great open spaces with Tim Reardon and cook bacon over camp fires. Smoke a pipe. Spit. Wear his socks till they fell off. Shave only when it tickled. Play poker on barrels with his six-shooter beside him. Be a man, in fact, and no longer a pale, cringing adjunct to femininity.

There was a slip in his letter box, calling him to the telephone. Wall something or other—probably a mistake. Wall Street and he had no connection. But it was not a mistake. A young woman with a clear, colorless voice was asking him if he were Mr. Hal Curwen. On being assured that he was, she went on, clearly and colorlessly, to say that Mr. Reardon would be very glad to have him dine and spend the night at Idle Wyld—and where could a car be sent and at what time?

"Terribly sorry," said Hal, "but I am going to the opening of *Girls Will Be Girls* to-night. Please express my utmost regrets to Mr. Reardon."

"Mr. Reardon anticipated you might have an engagement, and thought perhaps you might be so kind as to come afterwards. He told me to say it was most important. The car could call and take you and your suitcase to the theatre if you will kindly state address and hour."

"But, my dear, that place of his is off on Long Island somewhere, and halfway to Europe. Really——"

"Mr. Reardon said it was most important; said if any loss of time or money were involved he would meet it a dozen times over. Said I was to say that without hurting your feelings, and I trust I have done it properly, and in tactful accordance with his instructions."

A slight misgiving in the colorless voice touched Hal.

"You have done it like a perfect lamb," he said. "Though my feelings have been so often roasted in the fire that they have callouses all over. No, I don't want to go, my dear; it is too far away."

"But *please*, Mr. Curwen! I have never seen Mr. Reardon attach so much importance to anything. I hardly know what I shall do if you refuse. He will blame me, you know. I—I——"

The phantom was sobbing.

"Don't do that," protested Hal. "Nothing in the world is worth crying about except woman's inhumanity to man."

"I fell down with Judge Gear last week, and now it's you," pleaded the voice through tears. "I have only recently had the promotion, and now I will lose it sure. And he said you were such a nice man."

Hal could not resist that.

"The donkey is noosed," he said. "Have the car waiting

at Seventy West Forty-fourth Street at eight o'clock—my club, you know—and tell me what it looks like.”

“Looks like?”

“What kind of a car, silly.”

“Oh! A superb yellow Isotto Fraschini, swung very low. He keeps two both the same.”

“Well, tell the man to put it where everybody can see me getting into it, and if it is the same one I was in the other night I should be glad of the key to the cellar.”

This pleasantry, at first incomprehensible, had to be explained at some length. But it made a great hit, and there were bubbles of merriment at the other end of the wire; and downright laughter when Hal begged the phantom to accompany him to Idle Wyld and make it a petting party.

As he put up the receiver he realized with dismay that this was his first start as a woman hater. My God, he had no more gumption than a rabbit! Even an unknown girl at the end of three miles of wire could twist him around her little finger, and get herself invited to a petting party! Born a slave, living a slave, he would die a slave—to Woman. And he would have to pack a loathsome bag, and leave the theatre at a loathsome hour, and spend a loathsome night in an unfamiliar bed—just because the word “no” was not in his vocabulary where women were concerned. Thus engrossed he hardly thought of Reardon at all except with irritation. These impulsive friendships were another of his faults, and inevitably brought servitude in their wake. With a sensation of chains clanking all about him, he dismissed the whole horrid subject from his mind.

He shamelessly exploited that limousine; took a party of his friends after the theatre up to Ninety-sixth Street, where they lived, and poured pre-war Bourbon down their throats. There was a little cellaret in the car, cleverly built

into it; glasses, soda, and everything. Hal, somewhat exhilarated, spoke expansively of his pal, Tim Reardon, and enjoyed the sensation he made. Reardon apparently was famous as a shadowy and picturesque figure who had built his own Capua on Long Island and surrounded it with miles of impenetrable wire. Men with shotguns patrolled the borders of this veritable principality, and peeps might be had within of lovely young women in bathing suits careering wildly about on horseback. Hal's friends vied with one another in adding exciting features, which he felt were mostly imaginary. But it was enough to assure him that a vast legend had grown up about Tim Reardon, probably because he was so enormously rich and guarded his privacy with such jealousy. To the mob that is always enough to engender torrents of scandal. The only way to avoid it is to live in a glass house and never pull down the blinds before ten-thirty.

In this humorous but caustic defense of his friend, Hal made a poor impression on his party. Instead of adding to the legend, he was diminishing it. His popularity ebbed, and when he spoke of Mrs. Reardon, with an air of having gone to school with her, depression stole over everybody. There is nothing sadder than a punctured legend, especially when it is grossly improper.

Afterwards, alone, Hal wondered if it were indeed all legend. There was something untamed, something intensely original in Tim Reardon. Though a man of mediocre mental gifts there was nothing commonplace about him. His choice of a wife was one of the proofs of that—and his headlong friendship with Hal was another. An unerring kind of man, went straight for what he wanted. May have gone straight for vice in the same downright way. Perhaps it was all true about the girls and that—and the wire fence. Plunging through the night, Hal for the first time began to tingle with pleasant anticipations. After

bemoaning his fate so long it was a curious and very agreeable change. He reflected that every memorable experience of his life had cloaked itself in the beginning as a bore.

It seemed a fearful distance to Idle Wyld, though the car went like the wind. At the end of an hour they were still whirling through the night. It was after two; Hal began to doze. Why on earth did rich people live on Long Island when they could have duplex apartments in New York with wood fires and servants laid on like gas? Fools! Never again for him. He would send that girl a box of poisoned candy; would go into Hepworth's and say: "A five-pound box, please, of your best poisoned chocolates—assorted." And wait the interminable time it always took to tie a bow of ribbon around it.

They slowed down, and then stopped in front of a park gate. Lights flashed out, revealing the imposing dimensions of the gate and the vague outline of a house or lodge within. The only sound was that of their impatient engine. Then the gate opened automatically, they passed slowly through it, the lights vanished, and again they were speeding through the darkness. That the property was of immense extent was made evident by the time it took to reach the house. Unlit save for the grandiose entrance which belonged to the mausoleum school of architecture, it loomed mysterious and vast. The door was shut, there was no one to meet them; it was all as ghostly as a deserted cathedral and as still.

The chauffeur carried Hal's suitcase up the steps, and then unlocking the door, switched on an inner light. It revealed a cavernous hall of imposing proportions; the glisten of panelled walls; pictures, statuary, shadowy splendor. No welcoming servant appeared. It was very disconcerting.

"My instructions were to call your attention to Mr. Reardon's message and then leave you here," said the

chauffeur in a tone as cheerless as the surroundings. Pointing to a sheet of notepaper pinned to the door he departed without even waiting for a tip, and Hal's heart sank as he heard him roll away.

It was the oddest reception he had ever encountered in his life. The novelist in him liked it, the guest was outraged. What a way to treat people at 3 A. M.—tired, sleepy people who had never wanted to come in the first place! People who had been specially invited, almost implored by weeping secretaries! In this plural form and almost aloud, Hal expressed his overflowing resentment. A message on a door! A skull and crossbones would have been about as inviting.

Friend Hal, please follow the string to your room, putting out the lights as you pass, thinking you are like me and hating fuss. Sleep as late as you like and telephone down for any kind of a breakfast. It means a lot to me that you are here, though more of that tomorrow which I can hardly wait for. TIM.

Looking down Hal saw that a piece of twine led from the door knob across the floor. He was to follow it apparently, make it his guide. At this realization his anger changed to amusement. Tim had been inspired perhaps by memories of deserted mines; it was the old miner revealing himself—thinking this a better way than having a servant sit up. How absurd of him!

Hal closed the front door and obediently followed the twine through the ghostly hall and to a ghostly stairway beyond. Mounting it and delayed by searching for the various electric switches he reached the first floor. But the string demanded he should climb another flight; it wiggled up the stairs insistently as though it were part of a fairy story, though Hal at the moment felt very little like a fairy prince. At the second floor it turned to the right and down a long and luxuriously carpeted corridor where,

at the end, was another small flight of steps. Here the faithful string led up to a door on which was pinned a half sheet of notepaper:

Here it is at last. Good-night and sleep well.

TIM.

Opening the door, he entered a spacious bedroom, which was furnished with the commonplace perfection of one of the best hotels, and off it, through the half-open door, was the glisten of a large bathroom. At three in the morning to a weary man it all offered one of the most inviting spectacles imaginable. Ease, luxury, downy comfort; pleasure to body and eyes; and to top it all, a faultless little cold supper with a bottle of beer. Any resentment Hal might still have felt disappeared in that beautiful vision. Turning on every switch in the place—he had always asserted that electricity was far preferable to sunshine—he basked in the glare and ate a tremendous meal. An ensuing cigarette, with his stockinged feet cocked up on a brocaded chair, completed his beatitude. This visit to Idle Wyld, though a bore, was not without its compensations; and not the least was the absence of a valet to make him uncomfortable. Tim certainly knew all about making his guests feel at home. The originality of that guiding string, the awaiting supper, no supercilious valet—Tim was emphatically a perfect host!

He made his first public appearance near the luncheon hour, shaved, fed, and in a buoyant humor. Familiar voices in the hall had prepared him for two at least of his fellow guests. Entering, there was a hubbub of greeting. Tim, Mrs. Reardon, Felice, Mildred, and Jimmy Hare, and a bald, thin, reddish man in spectacles, who was introduced as Mr. Stott of the Traders' Trust Company. Some of them had been up for hours, and Tim and Jimmy Hare had already played nine holes on the private golf

course. But Mr. Stott had apparently been a laggard, and the two ladies of the house had only just appeared. Cocktails were arriving and there was an animated and talkative bustle about the tray.

When Hal had got through the obligatory chatter forced upon him, those gay commonplaces of a little party assembled for the first time, and the bantering, jokes, and polite-hostess inquiries as to whether he had been comfortable—he was free to regard in more detail the people about him. Tim in this setting, and in the last word of plus-fours, seemed more of a man of the world than Hal had remembered—more conventional, more the imposing man of affairs.

Perhaps this manner was due to Stott, who struggled to conceal a deference that was almost obsequious. Stott was one of those dry, capable natures, entirely devoid of humor, who had been trained for years to assume a mask of geniality. He reminded Hal of bank advertisements that, after stating their liquid assets were so many billions and trillions, went on to say that Service was their guiding principle, and that they prided themselves on their warm personal relations with their customers: "Make the Bank Your Friend," and all that.

Stott was anxiously ready to be your friend, to assume those warm personal relations at the slightest hint you desired them. He was as trained as a bird dog, almost over-trained, in fact, and his face fell instinctively into an expression of make-the-bank-your-friend and here-I-am-to-help-you—nothing is too much trouble no matter how small your account. As a high priest of Mammon his veneration for Reardon's wealth was almost religious in its fervor. He tried his best to conceal it, but his air was that of one treading on holy ground. Some overheard remarks made Hal appreciate that millions of Reardon's fortune were in his keeping. Talks of investments, of "holding on

till 89, and then slamming it on the market"; of "sticking away a big block and forgetting it."

Mrs. Reardon in the daylight seemed older and less radiant than on the night of Mildred's party. The artifice of youth was more apparent; she was more plainly a flower of the beauty parlor. But slender, elegant, and with her faultless profile and clustering copper hair, she was a strikingly pretty woman, none the less. She affected archness and provocation and did both charmingly; and that she was not wholly artificial showed in her attitude toward Mildred. She sincerely liked Mildred, courting her as caressingly as a purring cat, which Hal thought she resembled—she had such a well-licked look, and the same dainty, feline grace.

Felice was also changed in the atmosphere of her home. She had more assurance, seemed more grown up; joined occasionally in the conversation, and had entirely lost that air of a quivering captive in a bandit's cave. He was surprised to hear from Mildred that she was twenty-one. Shyly greeting Hal, she turned on him, not without coquetry, the glance of her lovely blue eyes, and seemed pleasantly conscious of his admiration. In breeches and boots and a tight-fitting brown coat that showed a waist of almost incredible slimness, she was a delicious picture of girlhood.

Everybody treated her as a kind of kitten, and once when Jimmy Hare's teasing went too far she ran and hid her face in Tim's coat. It was a winsome age, and she made it more winsome by her pretty ways and her lack of all affectation. Hal thought that was about the only sign of intelligence she possessed. Her talk was commonplace, she bubbled over with laughter at nothing, her notion of humor was to drop a piece of ice down the back of Tim's neck and then be chased.

Jimmy Hare, who himself was another kind of infant,

had won her heart by teaching her a slapping game in which the two antagonists stood face to face, hands on hands—the point being to withdraw your own hand suddenly and slap your opponent's in the twinkling of an eye. Hal had to go through with it; also Bingham Stott, who bore it with evident discomfort. Slapping his hostess's daughter did not appeal to him as a pastime. But Hal was touched by the way Felice played it with everyone in turn in such a sweet desire to entertain the guests as best she could.

As luncheon was announced by a Japanese butler and as they trooped into the dining room in no sort of order except to give the women precedence, Hal passed his arm through Tim's, and said with a touch of peevishness: "I don't see any S O S in all this, Tim. Why the dickens did you send for me as though it were something important?"

Tim's face, smiling down at him, suddenly grew serious.

"I wasn't prepared for this being run in on me," he returned, indicating the party and lowering his voice. "I clean forgot it was Decoration Day and a holiday. I am afraid it has put a crimp in everything till tonight when they all go to bed. Then I want to run up and have a real talk in your room, laddie. It is that important I can't even hint at it. Thank God, you came, and don't hold it against me you have to go through this like I have."

"Oh, it is tolerable enough," said Hal, mollified.

"It is hell when you are grinding inside with something," muttered Tim below his breath. "It will be all I can do to stick it out till tonight. I am counting on you like a dying man waiting for a glass of water."

Chapter IV

THE luncheon was unexpectedly agreeable. With Tats, the butler, standing behind his master's chair and directing with no more than an occasional lift of his eyebrow the most faultless service Hal had ever seen, it proceeded as silently and efficiently as though run by compressed air. The staff were all Japanese, pleasant to look at in their white clothes, which seemed as freshly laundered as the napkins. Hal, who sat at his hostess's right, was told that even the cook was Japanese. Tats and the latter had been with her for years, and she had brought them over with her from Paris. It had been a complicated business, involving bonds and a stipulated return, but Tim had somehow contrived to arrange it by their taking a university extension course. Tats was taking advanced psychology, and the cook was in economics.

"And no *blague* about it," said Mrs. Reardon. "I have to stop them studying too much, for as I always tell them you can't burn the candle at both ends."

"And the others?" asked Hal. "Are they also all bright lights of culture?"

Mrs. Reardon shrugged her shoulders.

"That's Tats's affair," she answered. "Positively I don't know them apart, though I suspect he smuggled them in somehow."

Lowering her voice and indicating her husband, she added: "He didn't like it at first—Tats maiding me—but I hate women about, they are so prying and treacherous. Then he—what do you call it in your droll language?—fell for Tats, and now swears by him."

"This must seem an extraordinary change to you after your life abroad?" said Hal.

She gave him a curious glance, as though to assure herself there was nothing ulterior in his remark. For an instant he regretted having made it. Then with a tinge of dryness she answered that she was a woman of the world, and that if one had enough money one could make oneself comfortable anywhere.

This tête-à-tête conversation got no further, for Mildred, who always reminded Hal at a party of a symphony conductor, was taking charge of it with an invisible baton. Never forward, never monopolizing the conversation except when it seemed needed, she knew how to bring it out like an orchestra. That day she happened to be in exceptional form, and soon had them in one of those delightful discussions where everyone wishes to speak at once. The subject was the tyranny of young girls in American life; their crass egoism, their utter selfishness, their detestable standards of purity that accepted every kind of soiling save one. In her deep, mellow voice and with a stinging humor Mildred rode the storm she had engendered, causing roar after roar of laughter, and bringing out the most unexpected contradictions and contributions from her hearers.

That most of her samples were drawn from Jimmy Hare's young acquaintance seemed to show it was more than an abstract criticism. Jimmy's defense of kissing in the dark, no matter how much married you were, convulsed the table. Stott put in with man's higher and lower nature, and in rather a confused interruption, made more difficult by the general noise, seemed to imply you should make your bank your friend. Hal spoke learnedly of a Hindoo religion, with a name he stumbled over, which made a hopeless love the most beautiful and ennobling thing in life. She loved you, and you loved her—across chasms.

It was inexpensive, loyalty was preserved, and your soul soared while leaving you delightfully free to pursue your ordinary avocations. Hal said he would go to church every Sunday if he could find one devoted to this religion, and keep a pew by the year. Mrs. Reardon favored convent schools, duennas, and early marriage to a carefully chosen *parti*.

"What Mildred means is that you leave it to the girls here to choose their own husbands," she said. "Of course they make a mess of it. I tremble to think what would happen to Felice if I turned her loose like that."

Though the girl blushed at that her mouth assumed a slightly mutinous expression.

"Please, Mother," she pleaded.

"Leave the kid alone, Anne," said Tim. "She ain't old enough to be in this discussion yet."

"They are old enough at four, and only stop when the coffin lid is nailed down," said Hal, more to relieve the momentary tension than for any concern in what he was saying. Tim had a ruffled look, and there had been the least touch of acidity in Mrs. Reardon's remark about her daughter. It called for the intervention of a neutral.

Mildred, smiling at her across the table, said she knew Felice would always be perfect—turned loose or any other way.

"I hope so," said Felice with pretty seriousness. "There is only one way for a girl to be perfect, and that is to love with all her heart and soul. When I fall in love with a man I shall follow him to the ends of the earth, no matter who he is."

"Even a married assistant business manager of a metropolitan evening newspaper?" demanded Jimmy Hare. "Oh, Felice, how can I quell my madly beating heart?"

"Or mine?" said Mr. Stott, brightly entering into the spirit of the thing. Though thin physically, there was

always a suggestion of the elephantine in his playful moments.

"Even if he were only a bus driver or a stevedore," continued Felice dreamily.

"The untouchable classes," volunteered Hal, who had already shown he had read a book about India.

"Though I would prefer a pirate," went on Felice, whom the conversation seemed to have stimulated to an astounding degree. "With danger and death on every side, standing with his arm around me and giving orders."

"Felice!" exclaimed her mother in a shocked voice.

"The captain, of course," said Hal. "Trust the smallest girl-child to choose the boss. I knew when she started it would never be the second mate, nor one of those likely lads in the forecandle with a cutlass in his mouth."

"The more a woman's a woman the more she wants a man that's a man," said Tim. "I don't blame Felice for having no use for them sniveling pups that clutter up civilized places like sand in a sandstorm. Lord, they ain't men; they are just nobby suits stuffed with sawdust. Men don't really begin till you pass the Rocky Mountains."

In the ensuing laughter the talk changed to other channels and the luncheon wore on amiably till they moved into the hall for coffee. Here plans for the afternoon were vaguely formulated, it finally being settled that Mrs. Reardon, Mildred, Jimmy, and Bingham Stott should play a foursome, while Tim, Felice, and Hal should ride. Hal as usual did not want to do anything of the kind, but every objection he made was swept away. Tats, it seemed, could produce riding-breeches suitable for every type of masculine legs; gaiters too; and as for a quiet horse, wasn't there Old Bob? Searching inquiries about Old Bob were all to his credit. Old Bob had spent the best years of his life in a circus, and could be trusted to keep up a rocking-horse canter indefinitely. He was an historical horse, having

belonged to Stella Montagu, who, perched on his reliable back, had jumped through millions of paper hoops. Expatiating on Old Bob, Tim rather gave himself away. It was quite plain that for a while at least he had acquired Miss Montagu with the horse, and that she had once graced Idle Wyld in its scandalous days.

Hal wondered why rich people who owned things always wanted to show them to you. He had already learned there was six square miles to Idle Wyld, and he foresaw he would have to see every yard of it. Yet he would not have dreamed of showing Tim his typewriter nor his pigskin writing case, nor the Christmas card he had received from a burglar friend in Sing Sing. However, there was one comfort, you could not see greenhouses on horseback. Of all the curses of wealth Hal put greenhouses first. Miles and miles of greenhouses, miasmically hot, and having to say, "What marvelous roses," or "How grateful the hospital must be," while mopping your fainting brow. No, better Old Bob than greenhouses.

Later, descending in his new breeches, Hal found Tim in the empty hall with Felice, he in an armchair and she seated on its wide arm, and speaking to him with a peculiar intensity. Hal caught the sentence: "You mustn't, Tim; I simply cannot let you," yet her face was so untroubled as she realized that she had been overheard that Hal attached no importance to the remark. Or was she like all women—a consummate little actress? Her bright explanation was almost too fluently ready. The silly old darling smoked too much, four cigars already; what about all those good resolutions? He would bring her blonde curls in sorrow to the grave—Tim would.

Tim was much less bright and fluent. He looked somber, careworn, and strangely changed from the man Hal had left half an hour before. It was as though he had received a sudden disappointment and found it difficult to regain his

customary geniality. As he rose Felice waved an admonitory finger at him and said: "Is it a promise or isn't it?"

"Hell, yes," said Tim. "And I hope a pirate will get you—the worst kind of pirate—an oyster pirate, with a mosquito den smelling of fish guts on the Chesapeake; and don't you never come round to me afterwards begging me to get him out of jail."

"We wouldn't demean ourselves," said Felice saucily. "I would get the gang to kidnap Tats and make it a straight business proposition."

Tim's face lit with a sudden smile.

"I sure couldn't do without Tats," he said. "That would certainly bring me out of the tepee with my hands up!"

All laughing they made their way outside, where the horses were champing and the others were waiting to see Hal mount Old Bob. He was a round-bellied piebald, and Hal said he had the kindest smile he had ever seen on a horse, and eyes that reminded him of his dear old grandmother's. It was no feat at all to mount Old Bob, and once on him Hal felt as comfortable as though seated on a sofa. The two other horses were lovely spirited things, shining like satin, which pranced about holding grooms in their mouths—or rather grooms' hands tugging at their bits. Seen from the safe vantage of Old Bob it made an animated and graceful spectacle. Felice darted up on her saddle with a practised air, her shapely legs gripping her horse like a vise. Tim's had a Mexican saddle, which looked somewhat out of place on such a thoroughbred, and was hardly in accord with his faultlessly correct costume; but its reason was revealed when he vaulted into the saddle without touching his stirrups at all. At this everybody cheered, and the horses, startled and released, danced off amid the plaudits.

"Can't do that on an English saddle," said Tim, as they

reined in after the first wild hundred yards. "There ain't nothing to get a grip on, and besides you want them cinched Western."

His equanimity had entirely returned; he was proud of his horsemanship, and felt he had just displayed it to advantage. His horse was a showy black with a strong theatrical sense and would—as a model—have made any battle picture a success. Hal praised its red morocco nostrils and said he envied the foam it spattered so lavishly. Old Bob did not run to foam nor did he curvet or rear; he traveled along like a trolley, and, as Hal said, probably gave transfers "on request." Tim had shot ducks off him; said you could fire a cannon off Old Bob, and he would never flinch. Tim, who had already picked up several handkerchiefs at full gallop, and once had slid off Diablo's tail to show Hal the safe way of getting off a horse when it was running away, was as exhilarated as a boy of twenty. Whatever cares he had were left behind; most of his grammar was left behind too; he was just a happy, devil-may-care Irishman, bubbling over with laughter and kindness and not looking a day over thirty-five.

Felice also felt the untrammelled joy of it all; her face, ordinarily a little pale, took on a lovely pink; her eyes shone with elation, and she had to be restrained from jumping gates. Once she went over one before they could stop her, and got a scolding that made her cry. She was an extraordinarily sensitive child; Hal could feel her response to every tone in Tim's voice; it made that overheard conversation seem more remarkable in the retrospect when for once the tables seemed turned. It must have been something very unusual to nerve this submissive girl to such assertion.

The gates, incidentally, were of an odd, self-opening type, looking like gallowses; you pulled a hanging rope and

they opened of themselves. Tim was very proud of them and he seemed to have installed hundreds. Gates had been one of his first troubles in Idle Wyld; guests on horseback were always leaving them open or getting their legs jammed.

"Sure, laddie, I have had my troubles in this place, first and last," he said. "Them gates——"

"It was them girls you mean," interrupted Felice, with a mocking brazenness and a laugh rippling like music. "Let's get our past history correct, Tim. What about the one who tried to shoot you, and the one who wanted to drown herself, and the one——"

"Pack of lies," roared Tim, not altogether jokingly. "Whoever's been filling you up with all that kind of stuff, which ain't fit in any case for your pretty mouth to mention, even if a tittle of it *were* true?"

Felice tossed her head impudently.

"I am not such a kid as all that, Tim. I know what an awful man you were, and I doubt whether you have changed very much since. In fact——"

"And you a convent-bred girl," roared Tim. "I don't know whether to believe my ears—and what Hal here must think!"

"Now that I have got over the shock I want to hear more about it," said Hal. "It ought to comfort you to know that writers love bad men; there is so little to say about a good man, you exhaust him in a paragraph."

Tim subsided into humorous growls.

They were a pair, them two! They ought to be in Hollywood taking fillums; they were wasting their rich and juicy imaginations in Idle Wyld, trying to make a monkey of him.

The track, hitherto passing through a picturesque desolation of pines, scrub, and sandy stretches, suddenly brought them into view of a little waterside settlement.

Five or six small houses huddled together, a stone pier, two squat motor-yachts, a dainty little sailing schooner, an actual gondola, and a nondescript collection of small boats, some drawn up on the sand, others moored. A tall flagstaff, jauntily rigged with crosstrees and ratlines, cast a sort of official aspect over the place, suggesting a coast guard station or something similar. A flag hung lifelessly at half-mast.

"Who's dead?" asked Hal. He was momentarily disturbed, and realized he had not read a paper for several days.

"A million men in the Civil War principally," said Tim. "Though it has been added to by the late unpleasantness since. Laddie, it is Decoration Day."

"Oh, I forgot," murmured Hal. "Yes, that is it, of course. But tell me, Tim, is it all yours? All part of the estate? It looks like a quarantine station."

"It's all mine," said Tim. "And it ain't a quarantine station at all, at all. The more I associate with a feller that writes books the more I feel he ought to take a correspondence course for young idjits. An expensive course for a mind naturally weak, and if possible in words of one syllable. Quarantine station—my gum boots! We'll just drop in on Carl Pipf here and sting him up with that. And I have another reason too for seeing Carl Pipf."

He reined in his foam-flecked black till it almost sat on its haunches.

"Listen, you two," he said. "Carl and me, we started this place together; if anybody knows me in the world, and through and through, it is Carl Pipf. We shall just drop in on him and ask for a certificate of my moral character; and if it ain't as shining clear as an angel's, may a thunderbolt strike me dead. If I dried up a minute before it wasn't because I was guilty, it was because I was so tarnation outraged. From first to last there's never been more than

eleven girls in this place, and every one of them went away cheerful with a check in five figures."

"I suppose it takes all kinds of angels to make a heaven," said Hal, referring to Tim's comparison. "But lead on, Tim, Carl sounds interesting, and a chair might be a nice change from Old Bob."

Chapter V

STOPPING in front of the principal house, which had geraniums in window boxes and an air of extreme tidiness, Tim let out a jovial shout for Carl. The door opened at once, for the clatter of the horses had already announced them, and Carl emerged. He seemed to have been engaged with his accounts, for there was a penholder behind his ear, papers in his hand, and he was wearing steel spectacles which he hastily pulled off.

He was a man of about Tim's age, powerful, seamed, and weather-beaten, clad in a flannel shirt and corduroy trousers. Naturally very fair, with a blunt Scandinavian countenance, a life of exposure had tinted him to the color of oakum. Hair, moustache, skin were all of that peculiar tawny hue, which seemed almost to have included his eyes, merging with the rest. There was something unmistakably maritime about him; a quiet, formidable, very competent looking viking with an unshrinking gaze. Hal said afterwards that his accent reminded him of a sea-lion at night school.

"How are you, Carl?"

"Fine, thank you, Mr. Reardon."

"Want you to meet my friend, Mr. Curwen?"

"Pleased to meet you, sir."

"He writes books, Carl. He is a famous man."

Carl regarded Hal with depression. Not knowing what to say, he did not say it.

"He is one of the finest fellers I ever ^{ever} knew," said Tim, indicating Hal. "He is one of my best friends. Anything he says goes big with me, and I want it to go with you, Carl."

As you will often see him around here, I hope—I want you to put that in the back of your head. You can't be too nice to Hal here to please me."

Carl grunted. It was like being put in the good graces of an Eskimo.

"Everything all right down here, Carl?"

"Sure. Had the starboard engine of the *Get There* tuned up. Nobody will ever pass you again, Tim—not on this yere Sound. Gave a bit of liberty to the boys to-day; they ain't a bad punch of pums as long as you keep a tight rein on them. Tunuonumen's gone sick; I had to lam young Fred Nomi and fire him—the fresh kid; that squint-eyed cuss I took a chance on off of the Swede barque is turning out fine. That's about all the news, Tim. Woncher come in?"

"No, we won't bother you today," said Tim. "We want to cover the whole place before tea. I really dropped in for you to give me a certificate of moral character."

"A certificate of *what*, Mr. Reardon?" Carl looked bewildered. Hal was amused at the occasional "Mr." and "sir" which Carl conferred on his employer, though there was nothing familiar about his use of "Tim." It had the same strong sea-lion accent of respect.

"It's being spread about I was a hell of a feller before I married and settled down," said Tim. "Even Felice here has caught the idea and been contaminating Hal Curwen, who though he does write books is one of the most simple-minded men in the world."

A faint grin spread over Carl Pipf's face.

"And what exactly am I expected to say, Tim?"

"The truth, of course. All of it you can dig up at short notice."

Carl meditated a moment, and then, turning his unblinking stare on Hal, said: "Anybody who tells you Mr. John T. Reardon isn't a high-toned gentleman or that he ever

did anything mean or low in his life can just come down here and take his coat off. I will count it a privilege and throw in an ambulance, free."

Tim gave a whoop of approval.

"I knew you would stand by me, Carl," he exclaimed. "I leave the court without the faintest stain on my character."

Saying good-bye they cantered off, leaving Carl still standing there with the sun playing on his oakum hair. Probably it had been the first time he had laughed since he had last seen Tim, and the unfamiliar sensation had done him good. His face had softened, and he gazed after Tim like a faithful dog.

"He is some kind of Finn," said Tim as they were out of view. "Though apparently it is such an awful thing to be a Finn that he passes as a Hollander. And there again he has his feelings, because you mustn't call him a Dutchman, neither. Altogether there are more thorns about that old rose than you would believe possible. And all his men are Finns too, passing for Hollanders and ready to fight if called Dutchmen. The best way is not to bring up their damned country at all, though I've never learned yet why one shouldn't be a Finn."

"A ship always sinks if it has a Finn on board," said Hal. "I suppose that is why."

"Well, motor-yachts don't," said Tim. "They are a fine lot of men all right—mine are. Carl's men really, because I leave it all to him, and hardly know one from the other. That is my way of doing things, Hal—a series of little kings with nobody to hamper them. Tats, king of the house; Carl, king of the waterside and the patrols; Macaferty, horses and stables; Webel, motors, trucks; Pat Nolan, gardens, tennis courts, golf, and caddies. My cabinet, so to speak; just give them each a monthly check, and that is all there is to it."

"And one permanent guest," put in Felice. "Don't forget Sam Bird."

Tim laughed.

"Yes, I forgot Sam Bird," he said.

"And who is he?" asked Hal. He liked the name. He repeated it relishingly.

"Oh, Sam Bird is an old scout who goes back to my beginnings," said Tim. "The weary miles we have tramped, and the rocks we have chipped, and the tunnels we have made, and the jumpers we have stood off with guns would take a lot of telling. Older nor me, and the best chum in the world, he stuck to me through years of misfortune. Then he got the Mexico fever and disappeared for years and years; thought he was dead. I meanwhile prospering from almost the very moment he quit. Then what if he didn't turn up here with nothing but his prospector's hammer and the clothes he stood in, and I persuaded him to stay awhile. But he wasn't happy at all; Sam ain't much of a society man, and he said it choked him."

"It chokes me," said Hal. "Well, what happened next?"

Tim seemed reluctant to go on.

"I don't want you to think I put my old chum in a lodge," he said at last. "I didn't favor the idea at all, nor did I want to stake him neither—Sam being almost all in. But he insisted on keeping the lodge—the one you passed through last night, laddie—and said that anything else was just goddam charity. He is as touchy as a Finn, Sam is. And so it all boiled down to his keeping the lodge, which I have arranged with switches and all that, leaving him nothing to do but look out of the winder and touch the right one. I did not expect it to last more than a month or two, but Sam has stayed now for nigh on eight years and is as happy as a clam. Wireless, grub from the house, and a hobby that keeps him busy all day long. And of course I drop in on him every day and make sure he

ain't died in the meantime. Sam is tottering old, you know."

"But the hobby, Tim?"

"Making liquor. You never seen such a hard-working old feller; and considering he don't make any dent in it himself, nor sell it nor give it away—I don't want all my people here boozing on hooch—he reminds me of a kind of bald-headed old bee, filling comb with honey for unborn generations, so to speak."

"He has two rooms stacked to the ceiling," said Felice. "And every empty bottle in the house has to go down to him. It is a kind of insanity."

"And as sober as a judge," added Tim. "That is what makes it so comical. I don't believe he ever takes a nip save when I drop in. But laugh or not, a hobby is a wonderful thing for an old fellow, and if it keeps him busy and contented we had ought to pat him on the back, I think."

"But aren't you afraid of his getting into trouble? Two whole rooms of it—that is something of a pace for home brew."

"Yes, I am," said Tim. "It don't please me at all if you get right down to it. But I have not the heart to make his last days miserable by taking away what is like a toy to a child."

"Isn't that Tim all over," burst out Felice in a rapture of admiration. "It's no wonder everybody loves him. He is just the kindest man in the world."

Tim, abashed, murmured something about its being a debt of honor. A feller who had saved his life again and again hadn't ought to be forgotten in his old age.

"You will only see a poor old wreck," he said to Hal. "But in his day Sam Bird was all he-man, and many a time I have had him pull me out of a faro hell with his hand on his hip, ready to shoot. What's a little bootleg booze alongside of that? He can make it till he dies for all I care."

And it ain't because I am the kindest man in the world—I wish I was—but because I owe Sam more than I can ever repay. Western men are like that—true as steel.”

“And always braggy,” said Felice, with a fond sort of malice, and including Hal in her smile. “I am sure they stood out in the great open spaces, Tim and Sam Bird, with their fingers on their triggers, and told each other what topping fellows they were. And what were you doing anyhow, Tim, in a faro hell? I suspect the noble Western man was perfectly blotto and gambling away their joint possessions.”

“It may have looked like that to any of the young ladies that came in to dance,” said Tim, whose smile was never so attractive as when he was rallied. “What is life but a string of experiences, and the richer they are the more you have lived, haven't you? And I am going to have a lot more before I cash in my checks.”

“Me, too,” said Felice saucily. “I am tired of being a shining white page with nothing yet written on it. Little Eva pointing to heaven and all that. Come on, Uncle Tom, and let's go West together and brighten the night life of Deadwood City! That's the place, isn't it?”

Felice's fits of audacity were made more captivating by her innate shyness and sensitiveness; her heightened color showed the effort they cost her, and her eyes sparkled with mingled mischievousness and shame, reminding Hal of a lovely little bride on her honeymoon. Her voice, too, was always a delight to him; it had a clotted-cream quality and was rich in inflections, a babyish, English voice that suggested she had a pebble in her mouth. That she made fun of him occasionally made him feel she was beginning to like him—or at any rate, not to regard him as a terrifying infliction that politeness forced her to endure.

Hal discovered he had been right about having to see every square yard of Idle Wyld. In fact, it was an immense

ride, with an abominable amount of cantering and speeding up to get it all finished by tea time. The landscape scarcely varied; it was always the same desolation of pines, scrub, and wide sandy stretches with gallowslike gates protecting cultivation and paddocks. Several times they overtook mounted men in green making their solitary rounds, who saluted Tim in passing. The whole estate was thus regularly patrolled, though as they skirted the immense wire fences Hal wondered how any human being was ever likely to get through them.

Their own pace, fortunately, resulted in a great saving of explanations. Tim had to shout them out in the most abbreviated way—often reduced to skeletons. “Green-houses.” “Forty head of Holsteins.” “Market garden—grow everything.” “Artesian.” It was sight-seeing made easy except for the growing discomfort of the saddle, and the stops at the different superintendents’ houses. These were in settlements not unlike the one on the beach; each a cluster of little houses with geranium window boxes. Hal was introduced to Webel, to Macafferty, to Pat Nolan, and always with the same embarrassing warmth on Tim’s part—the same Carl Pipf introduction all over again—while they stirred uneasily as they were told to “put it away in the back of their heads.” But of course it was very flattering to be given the freedom of the place in this royal manner. These different men knew very well what Tim meant and they registered Hal in their various minds with quick, sharp glances. Their manner, indeed, seemed to show it was almost an unheard-of attention; they eyed Hal with an astonished respect.

Their attitude toward Tim resembled Carl Pipf’s, direct, uncouth, but inherently respectful and admiring. With them all there was the same mixture of Tim’s, “sirs,” and “Mr.’s” in their way of addressing him, and the same faithful dog air as he rode away. One did not need to be told they

were paragons of integrity and trustworthiness; that was stamped on their rough-hewn faces, and was reflected in their various spotless hamlets. Each was supreme in his own domain, and showed it in his independent and responsible air. Hal was tremendously impressed. The rugged manhood of it all was good to see. Tim in his own world was less the rich man than the chieftain of a clan who were stalwartly grouped about him for the term of their lives.

Just the same it was pleasant when these embarrassing ordeals were over and nothing remained between them and tea but Sam Bird and the gallop home.

Sam had evidently been tipped off to expect a visit. He was dressed in a sort of old-fashioned undertaker's Sunday best, with the high heels of his cowboy boots showing under his trousers. He was a very old man; the dome of his head was altogether bare, and was encircled by frizzles of snowy white hair, matching a Santa Claus beard. His manners were charming; there was a silken courtesy in his mellow old voice; no duke could have done the honors of his modest home with more graciousness, though possibly with more grammar. Old Sam Bird was instinctively a gentleman.

"A writer, sir?" he said to Hal, after the preliminaries and all had seated themselves in the bare little sitting room, of which the only embellishment was a glass-covered case of mineral specimens. "What a privilege for an old man who has never met a writer before! I hope Tim hasn't shocked you too much with his rough ways? I have been educating that boy for the last thirty years, Mr. Curwen, and sometimes I doubt if it has been a great success."

"It has been a dreadful failure, Mr. Bird," said Felice. "Positively he is getting worse all the time; I hardly know what's going to happen."

"And associating with writers and riffraff," added Hal. "He is heading downhill as fast as he can."

Sam Bird chuckled. He liked this kind of talk.

"Waal, perhaps it may be the teacher's fault," he said. "Perhaps there was too much manual training in my course; too much chipping rocks and digging tunnels; too much beans and hardtack. And then of course it warn't coeducational, and we didn't have any apparatus or sich except our picks and six-shooters. Not that Tim wouldn't have made it coeducational if I had let him. Ha, ha! Say, Tim, do you remember that prairie schooner outfit that camped by us on the Little Big Horn? That girl—whatever was her name——?"

"Don't remember nothing," interrupted Tim. "And what I do recall was all to your discredit, 'you old galoot, with that there widow. Ain't we going to have a drink?"

"I thought you had come to see me," said Sam, pretending to be wounded as he rose to his feet. "I thought this was friendship's offering—bringing me lovely youth and literary distinction . . ." Here Sam bowed deferentially in turn to their respective exponents. "And I find it is no more than being mistook for a common road house. Waal, perhaps it will be the fastest way of getting rid of you, though I sure would like to keep the others."

A tray was produced on which was a carafe of whisky, several glasses, a small glass water pitcher containing water, and another full of orangeade. Hal would have preferred the orangeade, which had been made for Felice, but he realized that this might have been regarded as a slur on his host's home brew. Tim and Sam Bird took theirs in the Western way; one swallow, a gasp, and a quick reach for the "chaser" as the water was called. Hal effetely sipped his, which he had half filled with water. It was very good. Tim, winking across at him, asked how he liked the Randolph Club?

"It was always the finest Bourbon in America," said

Hal, making a stage-play of connoisseurship. The fib came easily because the whisky was excellent.

"Made it myself," said Sam, with a delighted air. "Yes, sir, made it myself; and if you were to ask me I should say it was *better* than Randolph Club."

Hal registered the appropriate surprise. Old Sam Bird beamed from ear to ear, his pleasure being increased by the hearty concurrence of his guests.

"Randolph Club ain't in a class with it," said Tim. "Randolph Club would taste like rinsings after this prime stuff."

"As velvety as a beautiful woman's skin," said Hal. "As mellow as a moonlight night in August."

"That's his poet way of talking," said Tim, pointing at Hal. "He don't mean no harm, you must not mind him."

"It is plain to see he is a gentleman of discrimination," said Sam, who was still ecstatic. "It is a proud moment for me to entertain a famous writer and give him something he appreciates. We must have another, boys."

It was impossible to avoid it; Sam tottered about with the decanter, and his hand was snatched to make the drink as small as possible. Fortunately he did not see very well, and good stage-play made up the rest. Then making apologies for so short a visit, Tim led the way outside with old Sam bringing up the rear and watching them as they mounted again. As Tim grasped his hand in parting, Sam held on to it, looking up with a peculiar yearning in his old eyes.

"Tim," he said, "you ain't been yourself today. There is something on your mind, Tim, for all your laughing and cracks. You've got enough money, leave Wall Street alone; sleep comfortable and enjoy what you have got."

"Go to hell," exclaimed Tim, in an intonation wholly jovial. "I haven't been in Wall Street in a coon's age, and don't mean to."

The old man was still looking up at him fixedly; with the yearning was a strange far-away expression, as though he were gazing past Tim into infinite space. Hal thought ancient prophets must have looked like that; forgotten memories of Samuel warning King Saul recurred to him.

"Whatever it is, don't do it," said Sam Bird. "No good will come of it. I see danger ahead, Tim. I see death."

"It is the hooch," said Tim, with a big laugh. "Lay easy on the stuff, Sam; perhaps it is the fusel oil talking—and talking mighty good sense, too!" And cutting short any further expostulations with a word of farewell he touched his spurs to Diablo.

As soon as their pace slackened Hal asked what the old fellow had been driving at.

Tim uttered a snort of derision.

"He is a damned old fool," he said. "Sam is given to that kind of thing, picked it up in Death Valley years ago after nigh dying of thirst. Has an inner voice that tells him things, though all it ever did for him was to boost wildcat stocks and bring him to where he is today. Sam Bird was once a well-fixed man till that voice of his played him for a sucker."

"It frightened me, Tim," murmured Felice. "It made me shiver." Her face on his was seeking reassurance.

"Oh, don't you worry," said Tim. "There's nothing to it, my pet—only foolishness." He smiled at her, and his voice was warm and caressing. "Humans make their own fates, and the only spirits I know of are in bottles. If his voice were any good it would tell Sam to stop bootlegging."

He continued in this strain till he had Felice smiling, too, and then said they had better hurry up if they were to be back for tea.

But Hal, who was full of perception even while bouncing up and down on Old Bob, thought that Tim's lightness was assumed. His face was certainly overcast all the way home,

and his blitheness had ebbed away. He seemed somber and lost in thought. Had half-cracked old Sam pierced something in the other's breast? Had he uncannily detected something that Tim would fain hide? Had he shaken the big, confident man in some secret project? Hal, alive to strange radiations, was disturbed. His face, too, grew overcast.

"I see danger ahead, Tim. I see death," had said Sam Bird.

Chapter VI

IT WAS a jolly party assembled about the tea table in the big hall. They were all tired but full of fresh air and with the pleasant elation that follows physical exercise. The foursome party had returned with a great access of intimacy, Stott having become "Bingy" and shyly enjoying the popularity he seemed to have acquired. If it were somewhat as the butt, Bingy—who was unused to social shining—was humbly grateful for shining at all. Apparently he had committed every enormity, even to breaking his driver, and had been shameless about his score till an outraged caddie had lectured him in no uncertain terms. Mrs. Reardon, too, had become more confidently "Anne" to Mildred and Jimmy Hare, who had been on the verge of it at luncheon.

Mrs. Reardon was the least changed of the four. She was as conscious as ever of her profile, and had still about her the same atmosphere of artificiality. Hal wondered if she were not shy too, in spite of her apparent poise and assurance. She had a way of laughing at the others' jokes that was rather disarming, as though by doing this she kept within their ranks. Often it was her only contribution. Hal decided she was a terribly dull woman, part mannequin, part *objet d'art*. Well, why not, if you were entirely destitute of gray matter? Her way to please was with her copper hair, her profile, her slender, exquisite body. Make a lovely picture of herself in the most graceful attitudes, and then prattle inanities in a sweet, wooing English voice—while you enjoyed, with a sense of inhaling perfume, her copper hair, her profile, and her slender, exquisite outline.

Hal wearied of it all quickly, but he noticed that Jimmy Hare had quite lost his head about her. Jimmy was not the type that demanded brains if these other allurements were dangled before him.

Anne—even Hal was calling her that at her gracious request—seemed a little on her guard lest this devotion might displease Mildred. Anne's liking for Mildred, indeed, seemed the most genuine thing about her. The only time she forgot her profile was in looking at Mildred with affectionate eyes. They were peculiarly unhuman eyes, due to the way they were made up or injected with something, reminding Hal of eyes seen in aquariums. They were extraordinarily brilliant and as extraordinarily devoid of all expression—except when looking at Mildred. It was not surprising that Anne wished to get rid of her daughter, for the contrast between nature and art was only too apparent when they were together. Yet even then nobody could deny but that Mrs. Reardon was a dazzlingly pretty woman.

Hal was beginning to think Felice the loveliest girl he had ever seen. In a way he had always thought so, but at first it had not been without a certain resentment. But in the course of their ride he had seen her in a new aspect; there was more to her than he had dreamed of—more character, courage, and audacity, and an unsuspected sense of humor. Her excessive sensitiveness was the only quality of hers that persisted from his first impressions. She was shrinkingly sensitive. Strangers were an ordeal to her; the transitions to acquaintance were difficult to cross; her face was a mirror of charming trepidations.

Within Hal had some of his own. The girl was virtually being offered to him. Lying back in his chair, and consolingly conscious that Old Bob was a thing of the past, he played with the thought of sharing his Lexington Avenue life with Felice. He pictured her there, his imagination

mounting. Those lonely rooms made radiant by her presence, their silence broken by that bubbling voice, the world shut out, love shut in. What a paradise it seemed to a man who had allowed his life to become too gray, who was becoming old before his time. Hal visualized it in a sort of ecstasy. It was to be had almost for the asking. Was he to let it slip by him—as he let everything slip by—unless Mildred took it on herself to arrange it all?

This thought jarred him out of his enticing dream. That was exactly what Mildred would do unless he held to his chair, kicking and screaming like an obstreperous child. And of course it would all work out as it had with Claudia. A month of bliss in Lexington Avenue, and then he would be bundled out to be the captive of a smart little house on Madison Avenue. Chains. Dressing for dinner. The whole horrid ritual beginning all over again. Life controlled by a lovely little tigress, with all his regathered friends meekly walking the plank with scarcely a ripple to mark where they had disappeared beneath the waves.

No, once was enough. Loneliness had its compensations. He would never unloose another tigress. Why, indeed, this very house was a warning of what happened if you did. Good old Tim must have been so happy before he acquired Anne. Probably he thought he was happy now, but what about that strange yearning look that always came over his face when he talked of his past? His lurid past. Regretted it like the dickens, of course. Life was like the war—in which Hal had figured inconspicuously, picking up cigarette stubs principally for minor infractions of discipline. You fought and then you “consolidated” your position. Women were the consolidators in life. The soldier was supposed to be happy, wolfing beans in a nice, comfortable dugout after all his toils and feats. Consolidated for life—like Tim. Well, Tim had to stick it out. But a fellow who had not yet begun did not need to stick out any-

thing. Hateful phrase—"sticking it out"—and even more hateful when translated into action. Hal's glance on Felice ceased to be possessive; it remained admiring, but entirely renunciatory.

It was a pleasant party; Hal decided that the Reardons were the nicest rich people he knew; they did not crush you under the weight of their prosperity like so many others. Simple, good to look at; best of all, fond of Mildred. Mildred, sitting on the arm of Tim's chair, was talking to him with animation, while the smoke of his cigar rose in fragrant spirals. She was making him do something, of course. That was the worst of Mildred, she was always engaging your assistance for the unfortunate; she was as loaded with *protégés* as a Christmas shopper with parcels. Evidently one was going to tumble on Tim, whose face had settled into the lines of a genial resistance. Little good it would do him. Mildred was irresistible.

Jimmy was deeply cushioned on a divan with Anne, and little bursts of laughter came from them. Jimmy was a thickset fellow, not very tall, who excelled in athletic feats and who knew how to get cheap ringside seats for his friends. A burly, red-faced simpleton who was never happier than when lying on the floor and showing you how he could make his right foot touch his left ear, or something. Whatever it was nobody else could ever do it.

Felice and Bingham Stott, side by side in big armchairs, were prattling cosily. Hal, who had vaguely gathered that the banker was a bachelor, wondered whether he had "intentions." Stott was one of those austere-looking men who appear forty at the first glance, and then become younger and younger as you know them better. Probably no more than thirty-three and far from unattractive. Well-groomed, alert, and with the most gleaming spectacles Hal had ever seen, his overdeferential manner was perhaps the result of too good a heart. He certainly seemed an

unusually kind fellow and almost as sensitive as the girl beside him. That they were finding much in common was evident. Hal, stifling an instinctive jealousy, wished the budding romance well—if it were a romance. Bingham Stott would make a perfect captive—there was no doubt of that. One wondered, indeed, how he had escaped so long.

But it was time to dress; the sound of a gong broke up the little party. The time allotted for this rite was as prodigal as everything else in that house—a whole hour. With his clothes laid out and his bath ready, Hal foresaw a pleasant three quarters of an hour's repose before he needed to do anything. Taking a book—a dozen of the most recent ones stood between two bronze nudes energetically shoving—he settled himself, with his feet on the brocaded chair, to enjoy the pleasantest moment of the day.

The dinner turned out much less gay than the luncheon. Perhaps the unusual amount of exercise had made all the guests too tired. In spite of the champagne it dragged. Mildred's baton was never raised, or if it were, it was in a spirit of chastisement for erring husbands. With a pardonable forgetfulness which Mildred said reminded her of a savage, Jimmy had wiped his dirty boots with an embroidered towel. This wretched matter had taken place in the sanctuary of their bedroom, where it might well have remained. But Mildred, revealing the crime to the glare of day—or rather to that of dozens of wax candles—was pitiless in her reproaches, which disguised as humor were as stinging as a cat-o'-nine-tails. Mildred occasionally had such lapses, which might be traced to Jimmy's amorousness. Those giggles on the divan, and perhaps other indiscretions, had not been unremarked. For all she was a paragon, Mildred was a woman also.

Everybody came to Jimmy's assistance. Bingham Stott,

covering himself with glory, said he *always* wiped his boots with his hostess's embroidered towels—at which Felice went off into peals of inextinguishable laughter. Hal said he hoped nobody would mind the lighted cigarettes he had dropped everywhere in his bed—which set Felice off again. Tim, laying a heavy hand on the table, said a guest in his house was expected to make himself at home, and that he was surprised that as rough a feller as Jimmy had behaved as well as he had, by gosh. Poor Mrs. Reardon looked uncomfortable and made cooing appeals, which nobody listened to. The subject, tailing off, left the table somewhat bereft of conversation. But more champagne revived it, and revived it into golf, which interested everybody except Hal. Hal, indeed, decided he was sick of Idle Wyld. Sick of Idle Wyld and cross with Mildred. Golf as a subject was only worse than golf as a game. Stott in turn reviewed all the golf courses in the neighborhood of New York, and the growing price of membership. It was appalling.

The only bright moment for Hal was when it was accidentally revealed that Stott was leaving the next morning at seven. He was too busy for the time it took to return in his car, intending to motor only as far as Makomshook, seven miles away, and there catch the early express. With a dashing presence of mind Hal announced he would accompany him, and decided the matter with less general demur than he had expected.

Tim, to his surprise, made no real objection. Mrs. Reardon's cooing protests were easily talked down. Mildred seemed the only one who was sincerely disappointed by his decision; she pleaded quite hard for him to stay until the following afternoon, when Jimmy and she were returning. But Hal persisted in his decision. For once he was out of conceit with Mildred; she should not have gone for Jimmy in that horrid way. And to revenge him-

self Jimmy was drinking too much champagne. The prospect of an acrimonious trip back to New York gave added weight to Hal's refusal.

After dinner a roulette wheel was produced, and they played a game peculiar to Idle Wyld that seemed to go back to Tim's past. Everyone was given a hundred dollars' worth of chips, which if lost ended the player's participation—and in the old days probably involved a scandalous forfeit. The winner of the evening was to receive a little gold-handled penknife, studded with diamonds; and the loser, by way of a consolation prize, an expensive toy cat that squeaked when you pressed it.

The pastime struck Hal as being very infantile, though it had the advantage of costing no guest any money as well as giving him the chance of winning an extremely valuable little object. The little jeweled knife could not have been worth less than three or four hundred dollars. Felice, who sat next to Hal, confided to him that Tim had a box full of such costly trifles, which had to be of a character suitable for either sex. Whenever she won one she turned it in afterwards for cash, though that was a secret that Hal must not divulge. Otherwise what could she do with nine jeweled knives and eleven traveling clocks?

Tim made everyone laugh by saying that Hal might have Old Bob instead of the knife, if he were lucky enough to be the winner. Then the game began and continued interminably till Hal lost all his money and retired with the consolation cat. Anne was out next, and she joined Hal on his sofa. Her lovely rounded arms and her exquisite bare shoulders were just a little dizzying; she was wearing a shred of a dress from which she emerged like Aphrodite from the foam. Hal told her so, and she sparkled at his admiration.

She said she hoped he would come again; it was her

dream to have a salon; people like him, people like Mildred, also famous violinists and singers, who of course would be privately paid but who would come as guests. Would Hal help her in this plan? Regard himself as her first and most cherished recruit?

She cascaded compliments; took his hand at his assent and pressed it impulsively to her bosom, and was altogether very disturbing to an inflammable man. How had he ever thought her a dull woman? On the contrary she now struck him as insinuating and subtle to the last degree. He invited her to come and see him in a carpet like Cleopatra; she took it deliciously and expanded the idea, rippling with laughter. She mimicked the men bringing it to his door and rudely shoving it into his study; and then demanding a receipt in the American language before clumping down the stairs. Though Hal was much amused, his opinion of her grew more dubious than ever. Was she a demi-mondaine? An adventuress? He seemed to detect many of the indications of it.

Meanwhile the roulette was continuing with animation. Mildred was dropped out, then Tim, then Felice. Stott and Jimmy, pretending to make fiendish faces at each other, were in a duel to a finish. It was the noisiest of duels, and they shouted at each other across the whirling wheel, shook their fists, and yelled their orders at the trepidating marble. Tim, who was revolving the apparatus, set a faster and faster pace. Like a good showman he was whooping up the climax. Jimmy, sticking his last fifty on the red, bellowed encouragement to the marble—threats, appeals, insults. Teetering to and fro it suddenly ran into the black. Bingham Stott had won.

But that was not the end of the game. Stott was wildly excited; his fair, thin hair was tumbled; though he had scarcely drunk anything he acted as though he were tipsy. His customary reserve had flown to the winds.

"I will play you the knife against twelve kisses," he called to Felice. "Come on, Felice, and play me for twelve kisses!"

The idea was hailed with acclamation, enhanced as it was by Felice's blushing confusion. It was hard to get her to the scratch; she shrank back; she had almost to be dragged to the wheel. Here rules were hastily improvised—rules that as far as Hal was concerned were never understood. But he stood round the table with the others and joined in the general pandemonium as the wheel whirled and whirled. Then Felice lost, and while everybody held her, Bingy took his toll with almost as much flushing and confusion as his victim.

Hal loudly implored Felice to make the bank her friend. The others took it up, making it the catchword of what was left of the evening. Make the bank your friend! It figured in their good-nights. Make the bank your friend! Bingy, radiant with satisfaction, felt he had been the success of the evening. He had made a hit, and had all the elation of a man to whom such a thing had never happened before. The party broke up amid gay repetitions of "Make the bank your friend"—and Bingy's almost hysterical titters.

In the silence of his room, Hal regretted he was to receive a visit from his host. There is a mood for listening to confidences, and there is a mood where it is an infliction. Hal was tired; he wanted to go to bed and drop off with a book. What did Tim want, anyhow? Probably to tell him what an ass he had been to marry Anne. That was not at all a pleasant prospect for a guest. It was Anne's house too, and she had gone out of her way to be nice to him. Probably Tim had learned of a crimson past in Paris. Well, what kind of a saint was he himself—to object to that? But that was just what men did about the women they married. Hal decided he would not mince matters. He

would tell Tim straight from the shoulder that any puling of the kind was idiotic—and downright contemptible. He would handle the matter without gloves. This he-man stuff and pedestaled woman made him sick.

There was a low tap at the door, and Tim entered. He looked grave, almost anxious. It was hard to realize that this was the same man who so recently had been laughing uproariously over the roulette wheel. He came in quietly and dropped into an armchair with an air of extreme depression. There was the butt of a lighted cigar in his mouth.

"Haven't forgotten our appointment, laddie?"

"No, here I am, waiting for you."

Tim seemed in no hurry and took several reflective puffs at his cigar before he spoke.

"Did you wonder at all today at my introducing you to all my superintendents—Carl Pipf and everybody?"

"Never gave it a thought, Tim."

"Well, it was done a-purpose, Hal," said Tim. "And maybe you noticed how I laid it on, so that if anything came up later, they would know that your word went with me?"

Hal stared at him. What was he driving at? Aloud, he said:

"Oh, do get on with it, Tim. What in hell's the matter?"

But the big, rugged man did not get on with it. Instead he looked at the wall opposite as though, somehow, it interested him.

"Give me a little time to warm up," he answered. "I am a cold car and the hill in front is mighty steep, laddie. Let's turn over the engine with a little drink."

As he said this, he helped himself to a whisky and soda from the tray that had been set out. Hal joined him. The clock on the mantel ticked audibly.

"Perhaps I had better offer up a prayer," said Hal sarcastically.

Tim smiled, putting out a deprecatory hand.

"I guess I will need all the prayers you have," he said. Then, rising, he added that he would put a towel over the telephone. But he did not get a towel; instead he took the comforter off Hal's bed, and swathed the telephone in it.

"I have known some very nifty eavesdropping done over a 'phone," he remarked. "They pick up a lot more of a talk than anybody realizes."

"It hasn't picked up much yet, Tim. Not of ours."

Tim lowered his voice; he was too engrossed to be offended with anything.

"A man that has reached forty-seven has his best years behind him, laddie. But there are four more, well worth living, aren't there?"

"Oh, lots more; what are you talking about?"

"Real years—years almost as good as those behind?"

There was a strange appeal in his voice.

"Otherwise I should be tempted to do away with myself," he said. "Sometimes I almost think that might be the better way."

Emotion vibrated in his voice. Though outwardly calm it was plain there was a terrible turmoil within.

"I want so much to tell you," he said. "It is stirring here, dying to come out, and yet I hardly know what holds it back—unless it be shame, laddie. My God, it would have been far easier that night of Mildred's party!"

He took another sip from his glass and then looked up with the same helpless, suffering air. He moistened his lips; he was nerving himself for that avowal. Hal awaited it with almost an equal poignancy in his suspense. What in the world was coming?

It was a most inopportune moment for the telephone to ring shrilly under its comforter; not a mere tinkle, but a continuous, incessant demand for attention. It shrilled and shrilled with impatience, never stopping for an instant.

With an angry gesture Tim, who was nearest to it, pushed off the comforter and took the receiver.

"Yes, I am here," he said. "What the hell do you want?"

A tiny voice with a Japanese inflection answered that Boston was calling him. Every word was audible to Hal, who was listening intently.

"Boston can call tomorrow," said Tim. "I am never to be disturbed after eleven, no matter what it is."

The tiny voice answered persistently that it was vay-ree important; Boston could not wait; Boston had to speak to Mr. Reardon at once.

Tim fumed, muttering something about an intolerable infliction, a goddam impertinence that somebody should smart for. Then with a belligerent air he snapped out an order: "Plug Boston up here; I'll tell them where they get off."

The telephone buzzed indistinctly, and then emitted Felice's clear sweet treble.

"It's me—Felice, and it is something so terribly important and confidential that I think you had better come down to your study and take it there."

Tim demurred. There was a brief discussion. Felice's voice shook a little as she urged him to descend. It was dreadfully important. No, she couldn't say it over the 'phone. He *must* come.

Tim, with a darkening face, said he would come down. He looked angry and upset, and his assent had been none too gracious.

"This is a rotten way to treat you," he said to Hal. "But the kid is so worked up that I haven't any choice, though as soon as I have spit into Boston's eye I will come back. But you won't go to sleep, will you? There is nothing so important in the world as that talk I must have with you."

His chagrin was so apparent that Hal felt sorry for him. The discomposure of so masterful a man was somehow touching. Hal made light of the interruption, saying with assumed cheerfulness that it would give him an excuse for another drink. Then Tim, with an air of relief and again saying he would be back immediately, hurried out of the room.

Hal took up his book, too sleepy to bother any more about all this mystery. Earlier it would have fascinated him; now he longed with all his heart to go to bed. And it was only too evident that the coming talk was going to be interminable. Pent-up men like Tim could talk endlessly about themselves, once the sluice gates were opened. Indeed, once they started, it would probably last till dawn. Oh, damn! What could Tim have meant about Carl Pipf and all that? An extraordinary statement really. It staggered any conjecture one might have. Several other of his confidences had been equally extraordinary. Did he want to be argued out of committing suicide? But that did not fit in with those last "four good years." It was all very perplexing. Well, why not have a nap while he could? It might be the only sleep he would get that night. He closed his eyes. He slept.

The telephone startlingly recalled him.

"Mr. Curwen, sir?"

It was a Japanese voice, suave as silk, and carefully enunciating every syllable as though reading aloud to a teacher.

"Yes, this is Mr. Curwen. What is it?"

"Mr. Reardon very sorry, sir, regrets inability to see you again tonight. Says more sorry than he can possibly express. Terribly sorry, Mr. Curwen, sir."

"That's all right. Be sure and have me called at six. I am leaving at seven with Mr. Stott."

“It is all arranged, sir. Good-night, sir.”

Hal slipped off his clothes and tumbled into bed.

What could Boston have said to Tim?

That was the strangest thing of all—Boston stopping Tim like that.

Chapter VII

IDLE WYLD was certainly an admirably managed house. Hal was called on time; a breakfast, identical with the one he had ordered on his previous morning, came up at half-past six, and bearing it a Japanese, who deftly and quickly packed his things. Descending at seven, he found Bingham Stott, similarly shaved, fed, and packed, awaiting him beside a big closed car. Tats, who was the only recognizable member of the household, was there to dismiss them with appropriate politeness and the regrets of their host and hostess. Thus they rolled off on a lovely June morning, with a feeling—on Hal's part at least—of an exhilarating relief.

Bingy still seemed in the glow of the night before; their early start had in no way impaired his uninterrupted enthusiasm; he said it was the most delightful visit he had ever spent in his life, and criticized—one could not say cursed—the fates that were taking him back to work. Laying his hand on Hal's knee, and beaming at him, he asked his companion if he had ever known nicer people than the Reardons? Or a lovelier girl than Felice? Or a life more absolutely perfect than the one they had left?

"Though I have known Mr. Reardon in a business way for several years, this was my first visit to his home," he said. "It was a great privilege, a wonderful privilege, and though I do say it myself—I hope it doesn't sound asinine—I—I really think I made good."

Hal expressed the appropriate things, which, though expected, seemed to stir Bingy to ecstasy.

"You are a celebrity," he said to Hal. "You are so used to moving in society and shining in it that you can

scarcely appreciate the feelings of a dub like me, not too sure even about the right knives and forks. Whatever I have won in life has been gained against heavy odds, Hal. May I call you Hal?"

"You bet you can, Bingy; should like it."

"I thank you, Hal. Meeting you was one of the many privileges of that wonderful visit—not that I don't meet all sorts of distinguished people in my office—but never in . . ."

He paused for the right expression.

"Fashionable intimacy," he added. He mouthed it as though it tasted good. "Received as one of themselves, you know; expected to feel at home in surroundings of such unparalleled magnificence and luxury. Asked to come back."

His spectacles gleamed. His thin fair face was beatific.

"I congratulate you," said Hal. "You certainly made a hit."

He was touched by such naïve outpourings in a man who had impressed him as being so austere and reserved.

"I—I am not quite myself," continued Bingy, in a tone of apology. "In fact a most incredible thing happened to me there. Might I confide in you, Hal?"

"Oh, God," exclaimed Hal to himself. Was there no end to this father-confessor business? What was there about him that made him such a human lightning rod? Out loud, and with the necessary affirmations, he said he would be tremendously flattered.

"It's Felice," said Bingy. "Mrs. Reardon virtually suggested that I should pay my addresses to her. Do you get that? Wants me to marry her! It came out when I said Felice was the loveliest thing in the world; that I was just crazy about her—though of course I never soared to *that*! You could have knocked me down with a feather, Hal; I still don't know whether I am on my head or my heels; for with me, at least, it was love at first sight, though so

humble and worshiping that it had not a single ulterior thought. How could I dare to have such a thought? And then, too, I am thirteen years older. That is why I wished to confide in you, to ask you seriously as a sort of expert—a novelist is an expert surely—if you thought this disparity insurmountable? I don't want to make an ass of myself, I don't want to cry for the moon; least of all do I want a bust-up afterwards. When I marry, I want to stay married. Advise me, Hal; I am not fit to think it out; all I know is that I should be an idiot to go on unless I have a fighting chance."

He was very wrought up; a surge of primitive emotion had swept away the banker, leaving nothing but the man.

"In other ways I am all right," he added eagerly. "Twenty thousand a year, and the brightest of futures, and no entanglements. Insurance of fifty thousand, and passed only the week before last as a first-class risk. And then of course I don't want the girl hammered into taking me; no Auld Robin Gray and that; I—I would like to be—loved for myself."

"There is no reason why you shouldn't," said Hal. "Girls are all in love with love, and looking out like puppies for somebody to take them home. If there is nobody else in the way—and I am sure there isn't—you should have a walk-over. The thirteen years' difference is nothing serious. Once start romance with something concrete in trousers, and not absolutely impossible, and it is good-bye puppy! I am ashamed to tell you what a sure thing you have, if you go after it with any ginger."

This decision was so overpowering that Bingy had to have it repeated. He had almost the air of wanting it in writing.

"Thank God!" he exclaimed at last. "What a load you have taken off my mind, Hal! Any wavering I might have had is ended now, and I am not going to stop till it is

finished one way or other. Should I have your concurrence in ringing her up at the noon hour?"

"Yes, if you fluff it up—laugh, talk about the kisses last night. Don't be too serious."

"I will try not to be," said Bingy, as though listening to his doctor. "You mean all a little exaggerated, but with an underlying sincerity. I get you."

"And ring up Anne Reardon afterwards, and get the invitation she is sure to have for you."

"Will she?" asked Bingy, surprised.

"And one word more, Bingy."

"Yes?"

"Don't let anything at the bank stand in the way of your courtship. None of that slave to duty stuff, and if your superiors crab you—tell them the truth straight out. All the world loves a lover, you know; you will find it as easy as rolling off a log."

Bingy gazed at him in awe. He felt he had placed himself in sure hands, and murmured something about buying all of Hal's books. This would not only be a return but help him to a bigger understanding. After all what did he know about women except their desire for shaky securities and eight per cent.? Indeed, his business relations with women had always been slightly hostile, a constant struggle to prevent widows from ruining themselves. But this deplorable soft-headedness might have its advantages in other directions. Hal had revealed it. Apparently they were as reckless with their hearts as they were with their investments.

"Flatter her," said Hal. "Feed her up with it like a Strasbourg goose; stuff her with flattery till she can't breathe."

He was tired of the subject. Why not ventilate it with a little wholesome fresh air? If it caused Bingy to shrink into his shell—all the better.

But there was no shrinking in Bingy. He was insatiably determined to continue the conversation. It continued on the platform while they awaited their train; continued in the car seats where they sat together with the morning newspapers in their laps.

"Hal," he said, after the only pause. "I have kept something back from you."

"What do you mean?"

"I did a most unwarrantable thing this morning. I can hardly bring myself to confess it."

"Go ahead!"

"I hope it won't cause you to think less of me. A guest, you know, and all that."

"Left a love letter on her pillow?"

Bingy was shocked. It was not quite as bad as that.

"I stole this out of its frame," he said, wriggling, and producing from his unbuttoned waistcoat a large photograph of Felice. It was a lovely portrait of her, staring out at them with soft, ingratiating eyes.

"And I had to bend the frame a bit, too, in getting it out," he added. "My hands trembled and I felt like a burglar, but I simply had to have it. Was it terrible, or was it not perhaps in accordance with the er—ginger—you stressed so hard in the car? And ashamed as I am, I am going to keep it; wild horses would not tear it from me now."

"My God, Bingy, you *stole* it!"

"Yes, I did!"

"And you a banker, a high priest of property, a man of presumed integrity and honor?"

Bingy bowed his head in shame, but as he looked down at the photograph his expression became very different.

"All I can say," continued Hal, with an affectation of horror-stricken amazement, "is that I didn't know you had half the spirit to do it. I congratulate you! Keep up

that pace and you will be engaged the week after next."

"Then it wasn't so utterly inexcusable?"

"God, it was a stroke of genius; and as soon as you get to the office ring her up and tell her how you could not resist it. And listen! Beg her to hide it from her mother, and have a nice little secret together. You seem a quiet sort of chap, Bingy, but you have certainly made things hum—kissing her last night, stealing her picture this morning, and now starting an exciting little secret! You are not a banker, you are a budding Casanova."

Fortunately Bingy did not understand the allusion, though he scarcely liked being compared to an unknown Italian. But a compliment is a compliment, and coming as it did from an expert in love was doubly comforting. He half hid the photograph in his newspaper all the way back to New York and gazed at it without cessation. He was pitifully in love. Never having had a flirtation in his life, not to speak of more serious affairs, he had none of the usual attenuations to soften the terrific blow. Hal felt a contemptuous envy of him, foreseeing it would all run on oiled wheels to the Church of the Heavenly Rest and a little house on Madison Avenue. It was as predestined as the course of the sun.

They said good-bye at the station, but not before Bingy had taken his address, both of the apartment and the club. It must not end there, he said—meaning their friendship. He, Bingy, would need a lot more help, and if it would not be trespassing intolerably on . . . ? What about a little dinner, Tuesday night?

Hal, murmuring bright incoherences, pushed him off. Was there anything sillier than a man in love? Yet he liked Bingy; such a high-principled, innocent sort of cuss. Valuable, too, to a writer. If in the course of fiction he—Hal—had ever to break into a bank how convenient the Traders' Trust Company would be; Bingy could be trusted

to show it to him from top to bottom and supply helpful hints as how best to blow up the safe. How to dope the books too, and how to make floating balances cover enormous defalcations! Yes, Bingy was an asset, might suddenly prove himself invaluable. An author should have a whole collection of Bingys, chosen from different spheres of activity and all under excessive obligations.

In this pleasant mood Hal hurried home. How good it was to be back! His shabby silent rooms, with the sunshine flooding every window, greeted him as soothingly as a mother. He walked through them for the sheer pleasure of seeing them again, finding a scrawl from his housekeeper on his bureau to say that the gas company had threatened to turn off the gas. How tiresome of the gas company! It always acted like that if you forgot to pay it—oblivious of twelve years of punctuality, of an old friendship tried and true. Well, he would send them a check at once for their 00098723 cubic feet. What cryptic figures! Who ever understood them? The \$4.80, however, was within reach of his intelligence.

It was after ten o'clock; as a working morning it had been thoroughly spoiled, but there was still too much of it left to waste. Glancing through his last three pages, Hal resumed his interrupted task. He had struck a nice talky patch; with a little skill it could be spread out to look like a good morning's work. Talky patches were the oases on the way, the palm trees and bubbling springs of the literary wayfarer, plodding through desert sands.

As usual, once he had begun, he lost all count of time. Four taps at his door roused him to the realization that it was Nigma—and noon. What ages it seemed since he had last seen her! He hastened to the door and let her in.

Of course she said "Phew," and moved over to open the windows. It was the invariable preliminary, while his eyes followed her in admiration. What beauty there was in

radiant health and vitality! What a sense of dewy freshness Nigma always brought with her! Hal waited impatiently for her to take off her hat and throw it negligently aside; he loved her close-cropped, silky-black hair—her sealskin hair—and the gesture of her upraised hands smoothing it while she threw back her head and smiled at him. It was indefinably alluring, and filled him with an indefinable happiness.

A moment later she was sitting beside him at the desk and producing that wretched ten-dollar bill. How could romance bloom after that? It instantly wilted and died. And the only thing one could do in revenge was to call her a little elephant. Nigma was a very vigorous young woman, who could never have fulfilled the fashionable requirement of jumping through her garter. She was almost as tall as Hal, and weighed, as he knew, a hundred and forty-one pounds. Hence it ought to have been very wounding to be called a little elephant. But Nigma did not seem to care; she probably knew what a lovely figure she had, even if it were not in the prevailing bean-poly mode.

“Now then, little elephant, let’s get busy,” said Hal. The ten-dollar bill had turned him into a brute.

But that morning Nigma seemed in no hurry to get on with her lesson.

“And you went to the party?” she asked. “The party your friend Mildred gave, where you met the rich girl you were to marry?”

Hal, briefly telling of the party, continued the tale to Idle Wyld. He was very racy about it; Nigma was kept in a bubble of mirth. By the time he had brought Bingy back to Pennsylvania Station she shook with laughter. He had galloped through it all, conscious of Nigma’s sheets before him and of the time he was bound to give them. The very early breakfast had made him hungry, and he had no desire to be late for luncheon at the club.

But when he had finished Nigma was still disinclined for her lesson. Her eyes consciously avoided the manuscript before her.

"I have something funny to tell you," she said. "One of those coincidences that are almost unbelievable. I have the same dentist as Mrs. Reardon!"

Hal was not particularly interested. This was no way to bring luncheon nearer. Why should she not have the same dentist as Anne Reardon? He said so aloud, glancing significantly at the spread-out sheets.

"Oh, of course," she agreed, still refusing to see them. "There is nothing very much in that. But the dentist this morning happened to bring up Mrs. Reardon's name. He was very worked up; probably he told the same thing to everyone that came; he was bursting with it."

"Bursting with what? I don't understand."

"This," said Nigma, producing a little printed cutting from her purse. "I bought a copy, and cut it out, knowing it would interest you."

"A copy of what?"

"The *Tittle Tat*."

"That horrible rag! I don't see how you could have stooped even to read it."

"He read it to me while I was sitting in the chair."

Hal, with a grimace of disgust, looked down at the cutting. The *Tittle Tat* was the most unsavory, blackmailing weekly in New York. Decent people did not allow it in their houses.

The millionaire dovecots of Long Island are again agog about the flame-headed lady who last year descended amongst them on the arm of a stalwart inhabitant, and who has been wooing them since, though none too successfully, in the sweetest of foreign accents. It is sad news to those who succumbed to hear that various Doubting Thomases have dug into her ambient past and found a husband who had passed out by the gas route,

though whether of his own choice or hers was never quite ascertained. The police asked rude questions, but as the lady was buttressed amongst Britain's Best, means were found to have the matter discreetly dropped. Our aristocratic cousins are good at that kind of thing, eh, what? But the news leaves our Long Island imitators sorter sick, and several, it is said, snooped back at a safe hour and stole the cards they had unfortunately left at Lazymere-by-the-Sea.

"How unspeakably vile!" exclaimed Hal. "It is the most shameful thing I ever read in my life."

"Perhaps I oughtn't to have shown it to you," said Nigma. "But I simply did not know what to do. Dr. Ely went on just as you are doing."

Hal was too upset to assuage her troubled feelings.

"It virtually accuses her of murdering her first husband," he exclaimed. "It is horrible."

"It came out this morning," continued Nigma. "One of Dr. Ely's first patients brought it with her. Apparently it had a hint of it last week, though very mild and obscure. Dr. Ely says that your friend must have refused to buy them off, and compares this to kidnapers cutting off the finger of a stolen child. Though this is almost its head, isn't it?"

Hal moaned aloud. That was what Tim must have been wanting to tell him the night before. Poor Tim! Poor Anne and Felice! Hal's heart was bleeding for the whole little family at Idle Wyld thus assailed by the wickedest of slanders. Gibbeted. Their reputations held for ransom by this gutter journal. It was unbearable. What kind of country was it where things like this could be done with impunity!

Nigma rose.

"I won't bother you with any lesson now," she said. "I feel I have done something dreadfully wrong—but you would have seen or heard about it in any case, wouldn't

you? I never realized you could have made such friends with the Reardons in such a short time."

Her voice was contrite, her dark, liquid eyes full of concern.

Hal comforted her. Her hand, which he had taken, remained unresistingly in his. He murmured she had nothing to reproach herself with; in fact he should have preferred to hear it first from her than from a casual stranger. And it was not that he was such friends with the Reardons, it was the injustice, the outrage of it! They were such nice, kind, decent people. To him it was like seeing their heads on pikes borne down the street. At parting she gave him a shy, hurried little kiss, and then ran before he realized what had happened.

He had returned to his desk, standing before it with his hands in his pockets, and lost in somber reflections in which that kiss had no part. He had entirely forgotten the kiss, forgotten Nigma; his thoughts were all at Idle Wyld.

A tap at the door awoke him to the fact that Nigma had returned. What could she have come back for? Going to the door, and opening it, he confronted—Bingy!

The banker was pale, and evidently laboring under some strong emotion. His face looked thinner than ever and his spectacles even more gleaming. Though dressed in the conventional garb of a metropolitan banker, he was wearing an incongruous tweed cap. He pushed his way into the room, panting a little from the three flights of steps, which he had evidently taken quickly.

"Of course, you don't know what has happened out there?" he said. "I thought I ought to tell you on my way out."

"Out where?"

"Idle Wyld—my car's downstairs."

Hal held his breath. What did it all mean?

"And warn you," added Bingy. "The reporters will soon

be hounding you, and as you were the last person to see him alive, we ought to define exactly what you are going to say."

"The last person to see him alive? My God, you don't mean—Tim? Tim Reardon?"

"Yes, I do mean Tim," said Bingy.

Chapter VIII

THE trembling of Bingy's hands had communicated itself to Hal's. There is no more terrible moment than the dawning realization of tragedy.

"You are not telling me that Tim has committed suicide?" Hal demanded in words that could scarcely form themselves.

"Nobody knows what to think," said Bingy. "All we know is that he has disappeared, that his clothes and everything were lying in his room just as he had taken them off. He has disappeared, vanished off the earth. They are grappling the lake for his body."

"But how do you know all this?"

"I rang up Felice about the photograph and got Tats instead. The police are coming. It is all horrible."

"They seem in a fearful hurry about it," reflected Hal, striving for a ray of light in the gloom. "He may have gone fishing, or had a row with Anne. Of course his clothes are lying in his room; they were what he wore last night—evening clothes."

"But nothing else is missing, absolutely nothing else. The valet is positive about it. The boats have been checked off, the guards have searched everywhere, all the grooms are out on horseback, helping them; bloodhounds have been rushed from New York. And not a trace—nothing!"

Hal's face became blank. It certainly sounded pretty bad.

"I want to get Felice out of it," continued Bingy. "If she is willing, I will marry her today—anything to get her out of it quick. My God, if anybody needed friends it is

she and Anne to-day! And I don't believe they have any, Hal—except you and me and Mildred. All the others, merely acquaintances, will fall away—won't want to be mixed up in it."

"What do you mean—mixed up in it?"

Bingy hesitated.

"There is already talk of foul play," he said. "That Japanese was in a panic about it. The white men down there are as ugly as hell. If Tim doesn't turn up, Anne is liable to be tried by the newspapers—she and the Japanese. Get that?"

Hal nodded.

Bingy's spectacles gleamed with a sort of menace.

"You have two choices," he said. "Safety first, or acting like a red-blooded man. Which is it to be, Curwen?"

"Number two," answered Hal, who detested the phrase. "Though aren't you looking rather far ahead? Tim isn't likely to stay disappeared. He will either turn up or they will find his body. That is what always happens."

"But there will be a meanwhile," said Bingy. "And it is that meanwhile we have got to see Anne and Felice through with. Newspaper sensationalism and all that. Police. The gaping, loathsome mob."

Hal assented. Who would have dreamed that there was all this inside of Bingy? His admiration for him swelled. What force, initiative, and courage in one he had regarded almost with contempt!

"Now about that last talk you had with Tim?" continued Bingy, with an air of having no time to spare. "The talk in your bedroom last night? Let's get to that quick. What was it about?"

It was difficult to condense such a diffuse and altogether abortive conversation. But Hal did so to the best of his ability, while Bingy, intently listening, absorbed every word.

"It seems to me it could bear any implication," he said when Hal had finished. "What was it but a long preamble to what he didn't say?"

"You couldn't put it better. That is exactly what it was."

"And just the stuff the reporters will love to lap up."

"I don't propose to let them lap it," said Hal.

Bingy mused.

"You must not," he said. "Just make it a good-night talk over a drink, and on no account say anything about Boston calling him up. Be as frank as hell and tell them nothing."

"Yes, that is the program, Bingy."

"Though I am going to find out myself about Boston," went on the banker. "That call from Boston just gave the quietus to everything, didn't it?"

"Yes, Tim went off very unwillingly—to answer it; and never came back."

"I will trace it right back to where it came from. Meanwhile we shall keep in close touch, won't we?"

"Sure. I shall be either here or at the club. I gave you the address, remember."

"Yes, you did—the Thespians."

"Good-bye."

"Good-bye."

At the door, as he was hurrying out, Bingy called back that he had rung up Mrs. Hare—Mildred.

"I told her to come out as fast as she could."

With that he disappeared down the stairs with headlong speed.

A little later, Hal himself descended them, though more quietly. He was exceedingly bewildered; the thought that reporters might be after him was disturbing, though it was a comfort to think he would be secure at the club. Perhaps the sooner he got to the club the better. At the club he

could dominate the situation, or simply have it announced that he was not there. Also he could have luncheon. He was famished. In the little hall, where there were five letter boxes, each bearing the name of a tenant, he took his own card out and tore it up. It was the nearest thing to protective coloring that a New York animal could assume at short notice. As he was carrying out this precaution it suddenly occurred to him that he had told Bingy nothing of that paragraph in the *Tittle Tat*. How stupid to forget it! Though excusable enough in the general agitation.

"Mr. Curwen?"

A stranger was addressing him, a slender, well-dressed man, with very bright eyes and a prepossessing manner, a man of nearly fifty, but alert and boyish looking. There was a dawning recognition. Why, it was Jerry Dobbs! He was a star reporter on Jimmy Hare's paper, and Hal had occasionally met him at Mildred's parties.

They shook hands, while Hal inwardly prayed that it was an accidental meeting. But it was not.

"Jimmy Hare put me on to you," said Dobbs. "He thought that our being friends and all that might persuade you to give an exclusive statement to the *Evening Chronicle*."

Any pleasure Hal might have had in the encounter disappeared. In a voice of lessened cordiality he suggested that Jerry—it seemed wiser to call him that—should walk with him as far as the club. Jerry assented amiably. Nothing would suit him better.

"We don't know what to make of that Idle Wyld matter down at the office," said Jerry Dobbs. "We have sent a kid out there to cover it, but it is a negative kind of thing, and would drop kerplunk if that Reardon suddenly turned up and said Hello. Most disappearance cases end like that, you know, and it leaves a newspaper in the air."

Dobbs's intonation was that there could be no more

vexatious thing than leaving a newspaper in the air.

"We probably won't use your statement at all," he continued. "We aren't going to play this up as a first-class sensation till we are surer of our ground. But we want to be prepared, you know."

Hal shuddered at the phraseology. What vultures they were—these newspaper men! And as innocent about it as snakes eating rabbits. This spruce, smiling Jerry Dobbs was a most attractive fellow, yet he would have no conscience whatever in holding up the Reardons to public shame. A despicable trade in its yellower paths. The *Evening Chronicle* ran to staring red headlines, often monosyllabic, and was read by nearly a million morons. News was nothing to morons; they wanted murders, crimes, divorces, and titillating breaches of the moral code; wanted them—and got them—price two cents.

"Now about that exclusive statement," continued Jerry Dobbs. "Jimmy says you were the last person to see John T. Reardon; that you had a talk with him in your bedroom, late last night?"

Dobbs listened expectantly as they kept step together. If Hal had not been very wide awake he would have fallen into the trap, which was to assume an exclusive statement, and then claim it as having been accorded.

"I cannot give an exclusive statement about anything so unimportant," he said. "I am going to tell the same thing to every reporter I meet; they can do what they like with it."

Jerry Dobbs showed no sign of disappointment, he was a veteran in the business; if anything he looked the more smiling and companionable, as though the walk were even more enjoyable than he had anticipated.

"What about two hundred and fifty dollars?"

The words went through Hal like a knife. If the *Chronicle* were willing to pay that it meant they were making

their plans for a big sensation. Nearly everything Jerry Dobbs had stated to the contrary was revealed as a lie.

Hal hid his resentment. There was a technique in dealing with newspaper men; one had to be as smooth and unruffled as they were.

"I couldn't rob an orphan newspaper," he said. "Reardon came up to my room for a good-night drink, and most of the talk turned on his place and the way he ran it."

Hal brazenly drew on the conversation he had had in the course of his ride with Tim and Felice. A good liar can always get remarkable value out of the truth. He did not say a word that could not have been honestly sworn to on a stack of Bibles—except for the change of scene.

Jerry listened amiably, but with no special interest.

"That wife of his is a queer duck," he remarked, as Hal came to a sort of end. "We have been getting the dope on her from London."

Hal felt an inward shiver; again that feeling of snakes and quivering rabbits. The implication was obvious that Jerry had seen the paragraph in the *Tittle Tat* and had acted on it.

Out loud, he said: "I would not bank too much on what that vile society rag said this morning; if you had ever met Mrs. Reardon you would simply know it could not be true."

"You mean the *Tittle Tat*? Pretty raw, wasn't it? Only it happens to be true—plus."

"What do you mean by plus, Jerry?"

The question was never answered, for at that moment like an unloosened whirlwind the Avenue began to resound with "Extra, Extra!" and the trampling yelling rush of newsboys and men.

Jerry blocked the first that came near him and handed over the dime that he had ready. A gratified smile spread

over his face as he displayed the unfolded sheet to Hal. It was the *Evening Chronicle*, bearing in staring red captions:

MURDER OR SUICIDE?

Below this, in lesser shrieks, though still in red ink, was a staccato condensation of the news: "Mysterious disappearance of John T. Reardon at his Long Island home—Vanishes from his bedroom, leaving all his clothes untouched—Was the most picturesque figure in the mining world a victim of foul play? Many times a millionaire, but began with a pick and shovel. Beautiful new wife can throw no light on tragedy—Jap servants reticent and evasive—Bloodhounds rushed from New York—Ugly rumors which the police will sift—Will Mrs. Reardon become the third richest widow in America?—Long Island Society seething with the sensation—Developments feverishly awaited—Lake being grappled and arrangements made to scour the Sound tomorrow, when the body may rise."

The sticky wet type grew blurred before Hal's eyes. But he had read enough; he knew by experience that the rest would all be surmise, and amplification of the headlines; he felt a penetrating sense of disgust—of impotent, sick anger.

"Smart work," cried Jerry. "It isn't often we beat them all to it like this, and if London gives us a proper hand we will have the whole burg ringing with it. Oh, boy! With any luck this may beat the Banks-Goodall case!"

Jerry was not usually so slangy; generally he spoke excellent English—almost with precision. But allowances must be made for so exhilarating a moment. The *Chronicle* had scored a big scoop.

Hal, feeling the hopelessness of discussion, took refuge in silence. His demeanor at least should show what he thought of it all. Though Jerry tried to break the constraint that had risen between them, Hal answered only

in monosyllables. Thank God, he had only to endure this leper as far as the club in Forty-fourth Street. The shouts of the newsboys were in their ears all the way, and this noise, together with jostling throngs let out of the offices and lofts at the noon hour, made his reserve less noticeable than it might otherwise have been.

At the entrance to the club, Hal tried unavailingly to avoid a farewell handshake. He submitted to it ungraciously, and his own hand might have been dead for any pressure it exerted. But Jerry pretended to notice nothing, and as he seemed about to turn away he remarked in a casual tone:

"We will pay five hundred for a signed, exclusive statement of five hundred words, sworn to before a notary public. You can dictate it to me in there in ten minutes."

Jerry indicated the club.

"And I happen to know you have a notary public on the premises," he added. "Why not fix it up at once and take my check?"

Hal shook his head.

"I don't want your thirty pieces of silver," he said.

Jerry Dobbs laughed, but there was little mirth in it. It was the defensive laughter of a man who refuses to be offended.

"You have taken this to heart, and I don't blame you," he went on in a conciliatory voice. "They are friends of yours, of course, and you want to stand by them. Quite right, though holding your tongue isn't the way to do it. Now before I go I want to say something seriously to you, Hal, not as a newspaper man but, if you will permit me to say it, as a friend. Just as soon as you get inside your club write that statement while the facts are fresh in your mind, and have it legally witnessed. You will be thankful for it some day if ever you get stuck in the witness chair, months and months afterwards—possibly years."

"You don't really think it could ever come to that?"

Jerry hesitated. His expression became enigmatic.

"There have been red-headed women in the dock before and there will be again," he said.

With that, and a farewell gesture of his hand, he turned quickly away as though he did not care to be further questioned.

He meant Anne, of course.

Hal, greatly troubled, entered the club.

Chapter IX

THAT afternoon was a most trying one for Hal. He felt the need of waiting at the club on the chance of any news coming in, for else how could anybody find him? And when the waiting became intolerably irksome he treated himself to a series of little five-minute walks in the neighborhood, returning always in a sort of panic for fear he had been rung up in the meanwhile. Though he tried again and again to reach Idle Wyld the line was invariably engaged.

More fortunate with Tim's downtown office, the colorless-voiced secretary informed him there were no fresh developments. She had evidently been put on her guard not to prattle to anybody; she could not be drawn into anything but a repetition of the phrase: "No, there are no fresh developments." When Hal persevered she cut him off.

Jimmy Hare, with difficulty, was extracted from the depths of the *Chronicle* office.

No, there wasn't a speck of news. One of their men rang in every half hour. There was talk of a reward of fifty thousand dollars.

But Mildred? Had not Jimmy heard from Mildred? Mildred was out there, wasn't she?

"Yes—but only once—to tell me where I got off," said Jimmy. "She blames that cursed extra on me, you know, and now they are bringing out another that is worse. This newspaper business is sure hell when the news gets mixed up with your friends and your wife. But what can I do about it except feel damned sick? I am assistant business

manager, I have nothing to do with the news end; I buy print paper, pay bills, and act as whipping-boy for my boss. But, my God, you would think from Mildred——”

“But hold on—what is the new extra about?”

“Anne.”

Jimmy’s voice had altered as he pronounced her name; its inflection was ominous.

Pressed, he said it was “pretty bad.”

“They have dug up a lot about the death of her first husband in London, nothing incriminating or anything, but just the gossip of the time—and of course just now specially unfortunate in connection with Tim Reardon’s disappearance. It was all simple enough; this Hamilton and she didn’t agree and had separate rooms, and one morning he was found dead from a gas heater that had been turned on but wasn’t burning.”

“Well, that could happen to anybody.”

“Oh, it was made a bit worse, Hal, by their finding a vial of morphine in her room with three pellets missing, and a small carafe of water beside his bed—empty. Get it? You can see the inference, though a chemical analysis revealed nothing. And——”

“And what?”

“She was carrying on with another man at the time, a Lord Somebody. Had it not been for this nobody would have paid much attention to it—except perhaps to her inheriting a pretty big estate. But of course they could not pin anything on her; there was nothing to pin, really—and it all died out. Tough, isn’t it? Digging it all up again and sticking it beside Tim’s disappearance as though there was a connection. Then——”

“Then what?” Jimmy’s pauses were exasperating.

“Bringing over her own cook and her own butler, and the whole household being Japanese; the smart-Alecks here are up in the air about it, not knowing anything about

Long Island housekeeping in a big way, nor how servants are changed every week or two in most houses. I should say Anne had the only establishment out there that might be called permanent, and as you know, it ran on oiled wheels—all the more credit to her and that marvelous Tats! They would like to make him out a dark-hued villain if they could. Tats! Isn't that the limit? But, say, I mustn't talk myself out of my job; this isn't at all a healthy conversation for a faithful employee! Where to find me? Oh, at the Olympic Club at eleven. If there is any dope by then I will let you have it."

The extra in question came out shortly afterwards, and the noise of its arrival reverberated in the street outside. Knowing what was in it Hal was thankful to spare himself a sight of any more odious red headlines. A man sat down at an adjoining table with a copy he had just sent out for, and Hal moved away lest he should be tempted to borrow it. But in changing his place to the other side of the room his glance took in ANNE REARDON as the man turned the paper sideways to get a better light. The name was in the same colossal type as the MURDER OR SUICIDE? that had appeared in the noonday extra. The impact of it was like an electric shock. Hal, shuddering, sought the furthest corner. But even here he was not safe. A man standing near him said to another: "Well, you must admit she was a pretty warm baby." To which the other answered: "That is no evidence she killed her first husband and still less that she made away with this fellow Reardon. Now, Eddie, take it from me . . ."

Hal again changed his place. Could he not be safe anywhere?

All afternoon reporters had tried to see him, though less perseveringly than he had expected. Perhaps they knew better than Hal the difficulty of assailing a club. Certainly, protected as he was by two devoted telephone girls and a

doorman greatly thrilled to have even such a remote connection with the Idle Wyld affair, he remained undisturbed in his citadel. For his short, feverish walks he had used the barber's areaway, both in coming and going, and any interception at the main entrance was thus made impossible.

He wondered at times whether he was not exaggerating his importance in the case, for apparently Jerry Dobbs had not used his interview; at least Jimmy Hare had made no mention of it. Or was it due to the fact that Jerry had seen right through his bluff and would have called it before paying any five hundred dollars? A first-class newspaper man can scent the truth through solid walls of evasion; one might as well hide a bird from a bird dog.

At five Tim's Wall Street office called him up. It was the colorless-voiced girl. No, there were no developments, but Mr. Stott at Idle Wyld had asked her to relay a message to him. Mr. Stott had been telephoning to Mr. Boyd Lancashire, their general manager, who was disturbed about the Stock Exchange situation. Mr. Reardon's disappearance was shaking the market. Mr. Stott's message was to say that he now apprehended the worst, and would Mr. Curwen be so kind as to meet him that night at the Hotel Vincent, suite 1142, between half-past ten and eleven? No answer to imply acceptance.

Hal of course said he would be there at the appointed time and if need be would wait all night. He was expansive about it till he was cut off. That young woman was a trained guillotinish. Efficiency, in the phrase of the moment, was certainly her middle name.

But it was terrible to hear that Bingy apprehended the worst; coming from such a confirmed optimist it was altogether devastating. Hal, in a very black mood indeed, went upstairs to look at the evening papers which he noticed were just coming in. All of them featured Tim's

disappearance as the biggest news item of the day, though much more guardedly than the *Chronicle* in any reference to Anne. Some left her out entirely except to say she was prostrated. None reproduced the *Tittle Tat* paragraph.

The more serious papers made a great deal of the agitation on the Stock Exchange; it had been a wild afternoon in the base metal section. London was feeling it—and Paris. Operators were assuming that Tim's company, the Zuni and Utah Consolidated, must be in difficulties and that in consequence he had committed suicide. Hal read that the only bright spot in the gloom was that a powerful "bull pool" was being formed to "protect the market."

Lying back in his chair, he wondered why he was taking it all so much to heart. A week before he had known none of these people from Adam. Had it not been for Nigma's insistence he would have missed Mildred's party, would never have known the Reardons, nor gone to Idle Wyld. It was surprising how one could dive into strange lives, and make their cause your own in no time at all. It was really due to Tim, of course; Hal could never remember having liked anybody so much at so short a notice. Tim was a tremendously endearing chap; Tim, in the essentials, seemed to him the finest *man* he had ever known. One instinctively looked up to him, felt in his presence an indescribable . . . No, it was beyond all such phrase-making. Tim could not be put into words. It was as though something shone from him, something ineffably winning and warming. One was entitled to mourn for him even if their friendship had been of the briefest.

Unable to stand the club any longer, Hal took a taxi and ran up through the Park to the end of Riverside Drive; and then, refreshed and soothed, decided to call on one of his neglected loves in Central Park West. She was a roly-poly little thing, recently divorced, whose endless monologues about her wrongs were made tolerable by a lisp and a sweet

eager impulsiveness. If one let her talk one could caress her all one wished. As a haven to a tired man, beset with cares, she was almost to be preferred to an intelligent companion. To an intelligent companion Hal would have talked about the Reardon case and thus continued the laceration of his spirit; with Luella Upshaw it was a cosy, tender interlude devoid of the slightest mental strain. He took her out to dine at Reisenmillers, where they could dance as well, and then brought her home a little before eleven. The same taxi carried him on to the Hotel Vincent near Grand Central, and with it a not unpathetic memory of his little roly-poly love, who had comforted him more than she had known.

At the hotel desk suite 1142 was rung up.

"Mr. Harrison Curwen to see Mr. Stott."

After a trying pause, Hal was informed that Mr. Stott was in and would be glad to see him in his suite.

"Mr. Stott has just this minute returned from Idle Wyld," said the clerk significantly, indicating to a bell boy to take charge of Hal.

The latter, before turning away, asked if there were any new developments out there.

"Not a thing, sir," said the clerk. "Mr. Stott told me they would probably be offering a fifty-thousand-dollar reward to-morrow."

Bingy was waiting for him at the open door of his sitting room. The strain had told on him and he looked dreadfully tired; he had too the air of solemnity that one associates with funerals and death, that obligatory solemnity enforced by social custom.

Inside, however, he became more the Bingy Hal knew, and a smile shone through his spectacles. He indicated the carafe of Scotch on the table, where there were also glasses and a siphon, and then with a murmur of apology slid back in the armchair he had evidently just quitted.

"I am tired to death," he said. "Any guest tonight has to shift for himself."

Hal, helping himself, said something about making his visit short.

"No, no," protested Bingy. "You are the only person in the world I dare really confide in. I need you, Hal; need you more than I can express."

Hal, out of the corner of his eye, saw that Felice's photograph had the place of honor on the mantel.

"She has been absolutely wonderful," exclaimed Bingy, who had followed Hal's glance. "Her poise and sweetness and lovely gentle dignity gave a kind of grace to the horrible tragedy of it all. Pale as a statue, but serene, helpful, and understanding; and oh, Hal, so tender and coöperative with me in everything. Hal, I did not know there could be such a girl in the world! Of course I could not ask her to marry me. I saw at once that such a thing was preposterous—out of place—jarring. Even to say I loved her was difficult, but I managed to say it—and how my one thought above everything else was to help her. And the divine look she gave me! I shall never forget the look, Hal; never! Nothing to go on, I don't mean that at all, but the trust, you know; the lovely, touching comprehension as her eyes looked up at mine and filled with tears. Pardon my lugging all this in, but in a hellish day I naturally turn back to the one lovely thing in it. That look, and the way she said: 'Oh, Bingy!' The memory of it sustained me through everything."

"Was it very hellish, then?" Hal had had enough of Felice.

"All sorts of people were trampling through the place as though it were a railway station; no one there but me to take charge, and nobody at all before I came. The Japanese had scooted into their own quarters, afraid to come out. Anne was shut away with Mildred; I never saw her at all

—Anne, I mean—and Mildred only for a few minutes. She said Anne was taking it frightfully, and made me send for a doctor. There were the local police from Makomshook; New York police with bloodhounds; that horrible fellow Carl Pipf with a lot of longshoremen, talking loudly of foul play and ransacking the whole house like a gang of bandits. Yes, raking the furnaces for God knows what, breaking open cellar doors, tapping walls and floors and leaving not one room or cupboard in the whole house unsearched. It was touch and go whether there would not be a fight with the Japs, but I rushed up with two policemen in the nick of time. Carl Pipf's yapping about foul play had got them on the raw; they were lining up for a regular battle with him. It took all my persuasion to get them to allow a search of their quarters; would not have succeeded at all if it had not been for Tats. There was nothing found, of course. Then——”

Bingy stopped, reaching over to take a sip of soda water.

“Go on,” said Hal, grudging even this pause.

“It was a pandemonium,” continued Bingy. “Newspaper men in hordes; all sorts of curiosity seekers dropping in because there was no one to put them out; J. J. Friedlander was there—of the Old Ironsides Life Insurance Company—with a stenographer and a number of his staff, worried to death about Tim's insurance, which if it is murder and not suicide will fall on them for three quarters of a million. Ghouls, those fellows. If they could have found Tim, properly suicided with a pistol in his hand, I believe they would have cheered! I told J. J. Friedlander that, and for a minute things grew hot. Then there was Boyd Lancashire with people from Tim's office, all nosing about and trampling and chattering—and Lancashire was as hostile to me as hell—at my being Tim's confidential business adviser, you know, and refusing to play second fiddle to

him; foresees a clash with me, and he's dead right if he's going to act like that. And all the while the search was going on outside, with people galloping and bloodhounds barking—little good they did—and the wildest rumors being passed from mouth to mouth. Body found in a well; body found in the lake; body found floating on the Sound; a man who had seen a man who had seen Tim that very morning at Montauk!”

“And was poor Felice in all this too?”

“Yes, except when she was running about in her car and getting those damned extras at Makomshook, till finally, with the help of a queer old fellow called Sam Bird and one of the guards, we managed to take refuge in the library—kept the place to ourselves, you know, and would not allow anybody to pass. One had to have some seclusion, some place where one could talk and listen in peace; a kind of headquarters where the latest news might be brought. Mr. Bird was an immense help; it was due to him that some sort of order was at last restored in the house; by dusk it was functioning after a fashion. At least all the Japs were back, and there was dinner and all that. But nothing advanced as far as news of Tim was concerned. We were just where we started.”

Bingy stopped, and then after a pause added miserably: “Just where we started.”

“It must have been terrible for Felice to read all that about her mother. You said she went off and got them herself—those extras I mean?”

“Yes. She had never known anything before of her father's death, not that aspect of it at least. She bore it like everything else—unflinchingly, seeming more concerned for her mother than herself. It was Mildred who took those extras the worst; I am not sure they have not ended everything between her and Jimmy Hare.”

“But what do you make of the story yourself, Bingy?”

All that about Anne and the death of her first husband?"

Bingy sat up; the question seemed to galvanize him into physical activity.

"It will be bad for Anne if Tim's body is never found."

"Yes, or found in circumstances that might indicate some kind of foul play."

"That is what I have been turning over in my head all the way back," said Bingy. "Of course, Anne is socially ruined on this side of the water at least. But the idea of involving her criminally in Tim's disappearance is too idiotic for words, for it presupposes that Tats and all of the Japs were assassins, acting under her orders. Her own alibi that night is beyond reproach; I went on a little quiet still hunt and established that incontrovertibly; not that it is of the slightest importance where she was that night, but I wished to be in a position to prove it to the kind of fools the police send out. The real crux of it all to me is Felice's terrible position; so young and helpless and beautiful, with this appalling shadow——"

Hal interrupted him. This was no time to get sidetracked with Felice.

"Bingy, there were some essential questions I want to ask you about Tim. How intimately did you know him?"

"In a business way I had his entire confidence; he had not a secret in the world from me."

"But in other ways?"

"Very little, Hal."

"Is there a woman in this?"

"I am sure not. Absolutely certain. Tim made no bones of the fact that he had cut all that out when he married Anne."

"Were his affairs all right? Was his fortune as solid as it seemed?"

"Absolutely. In a money way he had not a care in the world. He was always shrewd and cautious even in his

flings on the Stock Exchange, which were never more than trifling. Occasionally he went into the market to support his stock; he had earmarked a million dollars for the purpose, and the knowledge of this made operators usually leave Zuni and Utah Consolidated alone. Besides it was one of the soundest coppers and lay outside the speculative zone. No, Tim hadn't a care in the world as far as I know."

"Can you put your finger on nothing that might afford a clue? What did Boston want that night it rang him up and cut short my talk?"

The question seemed to disturb Bingy. A strange, almost frightened look passed across his face.

"Hal, for God's sake, never let it out," he exclaimed. "Boston never called Tim."

"Never called him!"

"No."

"But I was there. I know it did. I heard it myself."

"You didn't hear Boston, Hal; you heard somebody saying it was Boston."

Hal was stupefied. What was coming next? He waited breathlessly for Bingy to continue.

"I have had a most searching investigation made," said the banker. "Made in confidence by T. L. Felthorn, a personal friend of mine and a high-up official in the New York Telephone Company. Boston never called Reardon; that is a fact—a definite, established fact. Not only does the company keep the most exact records, but this matter, in addition, has been sifted by experts. It is a positive fact that Boston never called up Tim that night."

"Who did then?"

Bingy looked about apprehensively, and then lowering his voice said: "It must have been someone in the house."

Hal started with surprise.

"You mean it was a trick—just a trick to get him away from me?"

"I do."

"And Anne——?"

Bingy's voice rose above its ordinary compass as he answered in a kind of outburst: "Get that out of your head; don't even let the vibration of it get started; I have told you I can account for every minute of Anne's time! But once such a story got started it would pull Felice into the maelstrom. One of the Japanese boys ran to her to say that Boston insisted on getting Reardon, who was in your room and would not come down. Boston was making a terrific fuss about it and all that and would Missy come. It was a man's voice, saying that it was on a matter of the utmost importance; Felice said he seemed so agitated that she did not feel like wasting time in asking for his name and all that; hardly thought of it in fact. The urgent thing was to get it through to Tim. That is how she broke in on you, how Tim came to leave you."

"And what did the boy say? Surely the original message must have been fuller than the one Felice got?"

Bingy hesitated.

"That is what I meant about keeping this to ourselves," he said. "It would be the richest kind of mine for the yellow press. In the confusion and all we could not identify the boy—there are sixteen of them, you know—and Felice could not remember him at all."

"Did you ask Tats? He must have known who was on duty at the time?"

Bingy stirred uneasily, his face puckered with unsaid thoughts that seemed very disagreeable. At last, out loud he said: "I suppose we must make allowances for all the Japanese being terrified out of their wits, getting out from under, you know—feeling that they are suspected and all

that, and perhaps in danger of mob violence. There is a very ugly feeling down there, you know. But the point is, Tats denied everything; none of his boys had taken any telephone message that night; he smoothly alibi-ed them all, with every Togo confirming what every other Togo-moto had said. Sickening. It has made me change my whole opinion of Tats."

"I know it was a Japanese that rang up at first," said Hal, astonished. "I heard the Japanese inflection, and what is more I believe it was Tats."

"I can't make head or tail of it," resumed Bingy. "But one thing is clear; that no message came through from Boston. The second thing that's clear is that we have got to hold our tongues, bury all this inside us."

Hal nodded.

"Of course," he said.

"There is something else," went on Bingy. "Something that has absolutely knocked me silly."

Stopping for a minute he stared anxiously at Hal.

"It has to do with my professional honor as a banker—my telling you or not. I do not know what to do; I have never been so utterly perplexed in my life. Our professional secrecy in regard to our clients is one of those inviolable things, like a woman's honor, you know—a sacred trust."

Hal, greatly mystified, murmured encouragement. Surely, in the circumstances——

"I am not sure there could be any justifying circumstances. It is not as though Tim were dead, you know. Suppose he came back—what would I look like—having blabbed about his most intimate affairs? Yet I crave your help, your advice—it is all too difficult for me to wrestle with alone."

"Give me a hint then, and don't forget that Tim was exceedingly confidential with me."

"I know, I know," said Bingy in a helpless sort of way.

"But I doubt if that entitles me to divulge his bank statement to you."

A bank statement! Hal was acutely disappointed. He did not care whether it were divulged or not—and said so with an emphasis verging on the contemptuous.

"You don't understand," said Bingy with the same suffering air. "It means more than you think. I have had it minutely analyzed, and here is the report."

"Well?"

"Hal, I am absolutely staggered at what it discloses!"

Chapter X

"IF THERE were no woman in the case, and if he were not embarrassed financially, I can't see why his bank statement should be different from anybody else's."

Hal enunciated this provocatively. It was maddening to have Bingy go so far and then stop. Stop and bleat about his professional honor. Good God, weren't they the only two men in the world who had Tim's interest at heart? He added this aloud. It was no time for such idiocies, he declared.

But Bingy still demurred.

"If I did what I ought to do, I should call in Boyd Lancashire and the corporation's chief lawyer—Judge Vandenhoff, of Vandenhoff, Foljambe, James, and Harri-gan."

"Then call them!" Hal could not keep the irritation out of his tone; if Bingy shilly-shallied any longer he would simply get up and leave.

"I need your advice so badly," said Bingy, looking very woebegone. "But how can I get it without telling you?"

"You can't."

Bingy leaned toward a small table at his right and withdrew from a pile of correspondence several closely typewritten sheets.

"Here it is," he said. "You have convinced me this is no time for such scruples. I am going to expose the whole matter to you without reserve."

Still it did not come. The pause lengthened.

Hal waited for the words he saw forming themselves on

Bingy's lips. Bingy was always so precise in organizing his thoughts beforehand; it came probably from his habit of dictating all his correspondence. When at last he spoke it was as though to an invisible private secretary.

"Reardon's private account was with the Traders' Trust Company—my bank, you know—and until a year ago, or to be precise, ten months, was carried on in the ordinary way by checks. It represented a pretty big volume since all the charges of Idle Wyld were included. Doubtless when Tim needed cash he drew it at his office as such men do. As a matter of fact he seemed never to have had either money or a watch on him. Why should he? There was always somebody at his elbow waiting to be called on. Well, these records show that about ten months ago he began drawing cash over our counter. Cash—get that?"

"Yes."

"Considerable sums at irregular intervals. Nineteen thousand one day; eleven, another, and so on—and either in hundreds or thousands—or both. This statement gives the actual numbers of the notes and their respective denominations. Let me repeat that such notes were either in a denomination of one hundred or one thousand. Am I making it plain?"

"Yes, go on."

"The date of the last such item is about ten weeks ago. Here it is: Seven thousand six hundred dollars on April 18th. From that date to now, he never again put in a personal appearance at the bank. This singular series of big withdrawals came to a final end on April 18th. Is it still clear?"

"Yes, yes—go on."

"My secretary has added up the total of these sums, and the tremendous aggregate is exactly five hundred thousand dollars. Exactly that. Nothing more, nothing less. Five hundred thousand dollars. These apparently casual draw-

ings, when analyzed, thus show a most definite premeditation."

Hal sprang to his feet; he could hardly restrain his excitement; his voice rose in exclamations.

"Hold on," cried Bingy. "There is more than that. More!"

"What do you mean?"

"She—my secretary—has analyzed the denomination of the notes."

"Well?"

"The aggregate of Tim's drawings in hundreds is two hundred and fifty thousand dollars—which means of course a corresponding drawing of one-thousand-dollar notes. To put it in another way, Tim drew out a quarter of a million of each denomination."

Bingy methodically put back the sheets in his pile of correspondence. Hal lit a cigarette, trying to adjust himself to the surprising intelligence he had just heard.

"Then he is alive?"

"Is that your inference?"

"Absolutely. He slowly accumulated this money to make his get-away."

Bingy mused.

"Perhaps he accumulated it to provide for someone without the publicity of a will and all that. A natural child—or former mistress——"

"Before committing suicide?"

"Yes, before committing suicide."

"I admit that hypothesis is just as plausible," said Hal.

"It seems to me that it is the more plausible of the two," went on Bingy. "First of all, why should he drop out and disappear? And if he did, why should he be so concerned with the exact amount of the sum he was to take with him? On the other hand, when a man makes any provision for dependents it is always in round numbers, is

it not? Frankly, I think this has a very ominous look."

They debated the matter for a long while, but of course to no purpose. It was as though if they talked long enough a ray of light would suddenly shine through the gloom. But no ray shone. The mystery of these strange accounts was unpierceable.

After coming to a sort of standstill, with ever-lengthening pauses, Bingy remarked: "The thing I really want to consult you about is whether I should let Boyd Lancashire and Judge Vandenhoff in on this? Vandenhoff is not only the general counsel of the Zuni and Utah Consolidated but is Tim's personal legal adviser."

"Is their association a long one? If this Judge Vandenhoff is really an old friend of Tim's, I think we ought to consult him at once."

"But he isn't—that is just my bother. Vandenhoff only came on the scene about a year and a half ago, when poor Boyden died. If it had been Boyden I should never have hesitated for an instant. But Vandenhoff is one of those magnates of the bar that always make me tired. He is a chamber man, contracts deeds and all that, with ten doors, and all of them shut—between him and real life."

"And you don't find Lancashire very congenial either?"

"No, I don't. He went out of his way to be offensive to me at Idle Wyld. Not that I would allow anything to stand in the way of my duty. Only what is my duty?"

"I should leave them both out," said Hal. "If they should want to see Tim's bank statement, I should certainly let them do so—but I should withhold this report, which after all is due to your own initiative."

"And Anne?"

"Leave her out too."

Bingy nodded.

"You're right," he said. "We must always bear in mind that Tim might suddenly walk in, safe and well, and then

where would we be if we had to apologize for indiscretions and all that?"

After a little further desultory conversation they parted, Bingy saying that he would spend most of the next day at Idle Wyld. The indecision of it all was unbearable, he said. It would be almost a relief to find Tim's body floating in the Sound. If there were no news of any kind the next day he meant in Anne's name to issue a reward of fifty thousand dollars.

The next day the newspapers were full of headlines but devoid of any news. Hal's exclusive statement appeared in the *Chronicle*, featured, in a wiggly border like a valentine. It was substantially what he had told Jerry Dobbs and was without any unpleasant additions except what was supposed to be a complimentary reference to his personal appearance. Anne's past figured very little. The bull pool got much more attention. Zuni and Utah Consolidated, which had broken eleven points, had now returned to within two of normal. The *Chronicle* had a picture of Idle Wyld, with small insets of Tim, Anne, and Felice—and a cross marking Tim's bedroom: THE ROOM OCCUPIED BY MR. JOHN T. REARDON ON THE NIGHT OF HIS EXTRAORDINARY DISAPPEARANCE.

Nigma came. There was no pretense of her coming for a lesson, though she struggled unavailingly to lay her ten-dollar bill on the table. She was much stirred by Hal's connection with the Reardon case. She had lost something of her usual poise and Hal thought he had never seen her with such heightened color and such brilliant eyes. It was impossible to resist confiding everything to her—even the singular discovery in the bank's accounts. It was exhilarating to talk to her as a person and not as a little elephant—warily, and not always successfully avoiding grammatical pitfalls. One almost forgot indeed the underlying tragedy

that was bringing them into such a cosy intimacy. She had no contributions to make to the subject, however. How could she? Womanlike, she was interested in the personalities of all concerned. Anne—and what Anne wore. Felice—and what Felice wore. Bingy, Mildred, Sam Bird, Tats. At times Hal wondered whether she had not some conjectures she kept to herself. Some of her questions indicated that she shared the stupid newspaper idea about a household so wholly Japanese.

A message, brought by a bank messenger, sent her scurrying away. Evidently she felt she had been too prying and had perhaps trespassed beyond the bounds of good taste. She hurried away before Hal could even open the note. It was as though this renunciation was needed for her to regain her self-respect. She said something of the kind as she slipped through the door left open by the bank messenger.

I am back at Idle Wyld, everything unchanged except putting out a reward of fifty thousand. Anne much restored, thanks to Mildred who remains with her all the time. Felice really *glad* to see me; you can imagine my feelings! Old Mr. Bird is turning out a pillar of strength, and Carl Pipf has been pushed out of the house and back to where he belongs. Did the same to J. J. Friedlander's representatives, who are picketing the house as though they belonged to the Garment Workers' Union. Lancashire is already making trouble about keeping up the house. The cost, you know. Pretty previous, don't you think? I gather that Vandenhoff has a proper will. Think it may be necessary to persuade him to give me the names of the trustees. If they are, as I imagine, Anne and the Traders' Trust combined, we shall be able to tell Lancashire where he gets off. The house is settling down to some kind of order. Went for a ride with Felice on your Old Bob. She clings to me in the misery of it all, and I feel like a hypocrite at the shafts of happiness that pass through me. Mildred sends you her love, and wants you to go to her house and get three pairs of beige silk stockings and two pink

silk combinaisons—her spelling—from the middle drawer of her bureau, and have them sent to my secretary at the bank to be forwarded here by motor. This will show how worked up she still is about Jimmy. She won't even answer his telephone calls. If the body is in the Sound it has risen to the surface by now. Boats are out searching everywhere from here to Sandy Hook. The reward has electrified everybody, and there is a disgusting cheerfulness about it. How it makes me hate people—especially clam diggers in rubber boots. Shall hope to see you tomorrow.

BINGY.

By the time Hal had lunched at his club he was conscious that Tim's disappearance was slipping from the engrossing place it had had in his thoughts. Daily habits and daily routines are quick to reassert their power. When Billy Arndt sought him out afterwards in the snuggerly with a film offer for his last book, Tim was completely forgotten. There was a long and animated discussion, and by the time Hal had come to a tentative arrangement with Billy Arndt, who needed the confirmation of his principals, it was with a start that he remembered Mildred's stockings.

Deciding he would prefer to walk on such a pleasant day he went there on foot and brought back the package to Bingy's secretary at the Traders' Trust. Life was resuming its normal course. His personal preoccupations, again coming first in his thoughts, left little room for anything else. Eighteen thousand had been a pretty stiff figure to name to Billy Arndt. Had he overreached himself? And should he in the last resort accept a part royalty basis? Yes, perhaps—as a means of climbing down, but with no anticipation of any profit coming from it. Moving picture royalties were one of the fantasies of that fantastic business. No, he would not come down a penny. That was the only way to deal with a bandit like Billy Arndt.

The afternoon wore on, warmed by the vision of that eighteen thousand. What a gorgeous, rounded sum!

Eighteen thousand dollars! And he must not forget to have his name on everything, and stipulated to be always in letters of the same height as that of the producer. He paid a few calls; bought some collars, a pair of garters, and a lot of socks he did not want. Back at the club he closed with Billy Arndt, though at the sacrifice of conceding an option on his next book at the same price, and leaving the size of his name unstated. The producer, Earl Millais, would not tolerate an equality with anybody, least of all with a worm of an author.

There was no word from Bingy that night, and an after-theater call at the Hotel Vincent brought the response that he had not returned. But Hal was not much concerned. The whole strange business was fast slipping away from him. It meant, of course, that there was no news out there—at Idle Wyld; and probably too that Bingy was briskly continuing his courtship. Wherever you had human beings together, no matter in what stress or storm, there was always a love affair going on somewhere. Death and kisses. He must make a note of that for a poem.

The next day—which was a Wednesday—Tim's disappearance had dropped to a lesser place in the news, though there was the announcement of the big reward for the recovery of his body. The sensation was dying of inanition. Hal contentedly resumed his work. His day passed much as any other, and it was more from a sense of duty than any real desire that he rang up the Hotel Vincent, and then Bingy's bank, to learn that the latter was still at Idle Wyld. An effort to reach Idle Wyld on the telephone was unsuccessful. Feeling that he had acquitted himself of all obligations, Hal, not without relief, resumed the round of his normal existence.

The next day passed eventlessly. There were no telephone calls in his box at the club, and he did not trouble to call up anybody. The reward apparently had been unavail-

ing. Perhaps there was no body to find; Hal had no conviction of poor Tim being dead. But, then, for that matter he had no conviction of any kind. However, there was no news, and that glance he gave the morning newspapers was about all the thought he devoted to the subject. Billy Arndt had produced a contract, and it seemed better to get a lawyer to pass on it. Several hours were devoted to the contract and to much running to and fro before it was finally signed in the resplendent offices of the World Famous Artists, Inc.

On Friday, still without any news from Idle Wyld, and just a little disturbed lest it were his duty to go out there, he hired a car after luncheon and motored to Ossining, where a number of his friends lived. They were all writers or artists, none of them overburdened with money, and he followed the rule that rather existed among them of sharing any good fortune. Instead of coming up to some old friends and flaunting your good luck in their faces—which after all was not a particularly kind thing to do—you broke it to them in a shower of gifts, or an invitation to an uproarious meal. Hal filled his car with everything eatable and drinkable he could think of and went out to Ossining like a veritable Santa Claus, to spread the glad tidings of his eighteen thousand dollars. The news was warmly received; the clans gathered from the furthest hills; it was two in the morning before Hal reached home, somewhat the worse for wear but in the glow of one of the happiest days—and nights—that he had ever spent.

There was a big closed car standing on the curb; its slightly familiar aspect arrested his attention. Where had he seen that car before? The chauffeur was opening the door. My God, it was Bingy!

They shook hands under the arc light. Bingy's face looked cadaverous. Hal braced himself for the impact of emotion that he saw reflected on it. Bingy had passed his

arm through his and was drawing him up the street and out of earshot of the chauffeur. No, he would not come up, he was tired to death; five minutes was all he wanted, and he fervently expressed his thankfulness at having intercepted Hal.

"They have found Tim's body!"

"Found it?"

Hal was trembling. The impact had been worse than he had feared.

"Floating in the Sound off Mandeville," said Bingy in a strangled voice.

Chapter XI

HAL was indescribably moved. The surprise—the horror of it—was overwhelming.

“Some Portuguese fishermen found it,” went on Bingy, in a voice fraught with intensity. “One of them knew Sam Bird and came to tell him privately, not wishing to spread the news in case they were mistaken. Came to see Sam Bird in order to get him out there—a dreadful little shantytown of a place called Goose Creek, apparently a local slur on the Portuguese squatting there—to identify the body. Mr. Bird——”

“But, my God, Bingy, hold on a moment! Do you mean he was drowned? Or was there——?”

“No, drowned—bathing suit with his monogram on it—it was altogether conclusive, though the body had suffered terribly.”

He stopped and wiped his forehead with his hand. He looked tired and bewildered, his face was gaunt with misery.

With an effort he seemed to pull himself together; unsaid words began to form themselves on his lips; Hal had a queer consciousness of an invisible secretary, sitting before her typewriter on the Lexington Avenue pavement.

“Mr. Bird, with the remarkable presence of mind that he has shown throughout, informed nobody and left in the fisherman’s car for Goose Creek. All those people have cars, you know. Mr. Bird saw the body, identified it, and then hurried back. You can imagine the commotion! It was all very terrible, and became positively heart-rending when Anne insisted on seeing the body herself.

Felice backed her up—a horrible scene—I hope I shall never see such another in my life. Against everything I could say they ordered a car and went off with Sam Bird.”

“Then you didn’t go?”

“No. I am afraid I expressed myself in a way to hurt their feelings. Anne, all wrought up as she was, spoke to me in a way that even hysteria could hardly condone. Even Felice was ruffled—I mean at my interference and protests. Anyhow, they all left me there, and I had the bluest two hours a man ever spent in his life. Thinking I had hopelessly alienated Felice, you know; queered myself forever by such untimely and unjustified assertion. But thank God it was all right. She ran to me the moment she came back, took my hand, begged me to forgive her for what she had said. It was terribly touching—the contrition on that lovely young face, as pale as marble, begging me to forgive her.”

Bingy’s voice broke; he choked back a sob.

“She does care, you know, Hal. She as good as told me that.”

Hal was irritated. He did not want to hear about Felice.

“Then they saw the body? Identified it as Tim’s?”

“Yes, though how they had the courage to do it is beyond my comprehension. Sam Bird described it. The lantern. The rough, uncouth foreigners, stilled—humanized—by the tragedy. The body, horribly disfigured, was lying in a net alongside the boat that had brought it in. A shuddering experience. But conclusive and final as far as poor Reardon’s fate was concerned. He must have gone down to swim at some early hour in the morning and taxed himself beyond his strength.”

“Doesn’t that seem a peculiar thing for him to have done?”

“He had on his bathing suit; peculiar or not, it is plain that that was how it happened.”

"When you say disfigured, that doesn't imply any supposition of foul play, does it?"

"Oh, no! Mr. Bird has seen too many violent deaths in his time not to recognize all the indications. But the fish—the crabs—it was in a horribly repulsive state."

"Well, that ends the mystery," said Hal. "It is only in books that tragedy is not always commonplace. Poor old Tim. Who would have thought that would have been his end."

"Anne is off to Europe as soon as the funeral is well over; said she was only remaining while it was all in suspense. And Felice—what do you think Felice is going to do?"

The way Bingy spoke showed that it did not displease him, whatever it was.

"Going to get a position in Mildred's store. Saleswoman—and will go to business school at night. Has set her heart on it; independence, earning her own living, the modern girl and all that, you know. I couldn't have asked for anything better in my wildest dreams. She will have no money except what she earns, and for the time being will live with Mildred. Anne is outraged at the idea and won't give her a penny; Mildred told me that they have virtually quarreled, and naturally things have become also pretty strained between Anne and Mildred. Mildred is all for it; after all it was her own history, wasn't it? But my heart bleeds for the poor kid; she is so devoted to her mother and yet wishes to have a life of her own. Mildred is indignant with Anne, who is so eager to marry off Felice to anybody and yet cannot let her work. Of course I sided with Felice, told her I would do everything in the world to help her; she was so grateful and touching about it, holding my hand and looking up at me with those lovely blue eyes. Oh, Hal, if I am patient—if it all works out as it seems to be doing——"

Of course he wished to be told how inevitably it would all turn out in his favor. Once on the subject of his courtship he seemed ready to talk all night; but it was after two o'clock in the morning and the news of Tim's death had lowered Hal's spirits to zero. He had no compunction in turning Bingy back toward the car and almost pushing him into it. It was a somber parting, Bingy's buoyancy had lasted only as long as he could talk of Felice. Forced back to the tragedy he realized how spent he was. But his clammy grasp pressed hard on Hal's, though his good-night was a mere murmur. He was certainly dreadfully tired, and Hal was thankful he was rolling back to bed. Poor Bingy! He was in a sea of perplexities and hopes and crushed almost beyond recognition by the tragic news.

The next morning, after starting his percolator and his little pot of Quaker Oats—Hal's housekeeping was of the simplest—he ran downstairs to the little newspaper shop beneath his house and brought back all the morning papers. Yes, there it all was back in the most prominent place and with staring headlines. The discovery of Tim's body, unclothed save for a bathing suit, and retrieved by three Portuguese fishermen. They were all brothers, serious, middle-aged men in rubber boots as shown in the enlarged snapshot that had somehow been obtained of them, standing beside a large power boat. Apparently they had once figured in the news before, and this stereo had been dug out of the files. Gus Silver, Jesus Silver, and Antonio Silver—all about equally frowsy and unkempt; each with tumbled hair and a black moustache, standing beside their boat drawn up on the sand.

It was all an amplification of Bingy's story except a few omissions which were probably intentional on Sam Bird's part. At least nothing was said about the fishermen's first visit to him, nor of his original trip to identify the body. It was more compactly stated that Mrs. Reardon and her

daughter Felice, under the escort of their aged friend, Mr. Samuel Bird, had made a midnight trip to Goose Creek, establishing beyond any doubt that the body was that of Mr. John T. Reardon.

The reporters seemed all to concur in Bingy's explanation of a swim in the small hours, and perhaps an over-taxed heart. Certainly it had been a lovely, mellow night, when a man who lived near the Sound might easily have been tempted into such an adventure. The moon, which had been at the full on the 27th, must have been still shining in the early morning hours. The coroner, Doctor Conolly of Mandeville, had as yet set no date for the inquest, though the family was hoping that it might be expedited in time for funeral services to be held at St. Patricks Cathedral on the coming Sunday, for which provisional arrangements were being made. The late Mr. John T. Reardon had been a Roman Catholic and had always been a very generous benefactor of his church and its activities. In fact, the archbishop had now let it be known that the anonymous donor of the new Knights of Columbus hall in Morningside had been Mr. Reardon himself.

Hal went back to his work, and with curled-up legs and endless cigarettes continued the vicissitudes of an unjustly suspected hero. Tim was forgotten; time was forgotten; even the eighteen thousand dollars had receded and disappeared. Nigma unexpectedly arrived, confessing that it was more due to her interest in the Reardon case than any desire for a lesson. She had not even the pretense of a manuscript. It was just to drop in a moment to ask him whether he was going to the inquest.

"Of course not," said Hal. "What put such an idiotic idea in your head?"

Nigma made a little *moue* of annoyance.

"I have no doubt what was your previous incarnation," she remarked. "You were a limpet, and I doubt if you

were even good to eat. A low, poisonous type of limpet the dinosaurs avoided."

"I refuse to be offended. I am a limpet and I glory in it! Anyhow, why should you care whether or not I went out there to the inquest?"

"So you can tell me about it. I have never been so thrilled with anything in my life, and with you right in the thick of it as you are——" She gave a pleasurable shiver. "Oh, *do* go! You know very well it is all in line with your work. You have told me yourself that every odd experience is just so much added to your capital."

"Oh, talking of capital—I have sold the film rights of my new book, the one just out, for eighteen thousand dollars!"

Nigma looked disdainful.

"The worst kind of limpet—stuck to a rock and bragging of his money! Do you know what I am ready to do?"

"Offer me your hand and heart?"

"No, I want to go with you; separately on the train and all that, but sitting near enough to you at the place for you to point out all the people. Will you let me?"

Hal was surprised. This would be a strange change in their relations, which she had always kept so impersonal. Go with him to Mandeville! Well, if she had set her mind on it he knew he was lost. But it was a frightful nuisance . . .

"I couldn't unless you give me some kind of name," he said, hopefully snatching at an excuse. "I can't introduce you as Miss Nigma, can I? I will make it a bargain. Tell me who you are and then the poor limpet will sacrifice his happy hours on his rock and take you out there."

Nigma's expression changed. The suggestion was evidently distasteful.

"Won't Miss Smith do?"

"No," roared the limpet. "Miss Smith won't do at all.

If months of devotion haven't earned me such an elementary right, I might as well cease loving you altogether."

"But will you take me?"

Hal, pretending to groan, said he would. Though she ought really to have a name; everybody had; it was a convenient social custom.

Nigma ignored everything but the consent. She was radiant at having won her point, her eyes sparkling and her face tinged with pink. The sealskin hair, alas, was hidden under her smart little hat, which she had not taken off. Hal gazed at her in admiration, though she was making a most vexatious demand on him. Oh, those adorable young women, so pink and kissable, what serfs they made of mankind! He was to telephone all over the place, besides, and learn exactly when and where the inquest was to be held. Then he was to be back at his room at a quarter to three, when she would return. She had everything arranged, arduously arranged—for an unfortunate limpet.

There was the sound of steps outside, a knock at the door. Hal, opening it, was startled to find himself confronting Mildred, who uttered a muffled exclamation at the sight of Nigma and hastily backed away.

"I didn't see a thing," she exclaimed. "Shall be back in ten minutes. It is terribly important."

With that she turned and would have disappeared down the stairs had he not caught her arm.

"Come in, please," he said. "Any ideas you might have had are all wrong."

They were both smiling, Hal insisting, she demurring. Still with his arm on hers he drew her into the room, and the two women took quick appraising glances of each other. Hal, with concern, noticed how haggard Mildred looked. There were dark circles about her eyes and a yellowish pallor showed on the edges of her rouge. Compared to the glowing young woman who was waiting to

receive them, poor Mildred seemed miserably faded and old. She looked all of forty-five, although she was ten years younger.

"This young lady is my pupil," said Hal with an affectation of jauntiness and indicating Nigma. Then to the other he added: "And this is the Mildred I have so often talked to you about—one of the dearest friends I have in the world."

It was not much of an introduction, but at least it avoided naming Nigma.

"What do you teach her?" asked Mildred. It was pleasant to hear her musical voice again, doubly pleasant that it should be so amiable.

"Literature," said Hal. "Mostly don'ts; I am teaching her to write."

"As long as you don't teach her love, I don't mind," said Mildred.

"I have tried to, but it didn't go very well," said Hal. "Isn't she the most bewitching thing you ever saw in your life, Mildred? Of course she ought to take her hat off. Please take it off," he urged Nigma. "I want Mildred to see your beautiful hair."

"No, I must be going," said Nigma. "My lovely hair has an engagement. Besides, I mustn't be in the way."

There were exclamations that she was not in the way.

"I have only a minute's time myself," exclaimed Mildred, putting a detaining arm about Nigma with a charming cordiality. "First, is the wonderful rumor true that you have sold the film rights of the new book?" She had turned to Hal.

"Eighteen thousand dollars," was his gleeful answer. "I was up all day yesterday at Ossining, celebrating! Everybody missed you. It was unutterably gorgeous, with fountains running wine and oxen roasted whole in the street."

"I wanted to know before victimizing you for a car," said Mildred. "The inquest will take place out there at three at Mandeville, you know. Bingy has contrived to hurry it all up, and it is only a formality, anyhow. But I must go, if only in charity to that poor Felice. Will you take me, Hal? It is incumbent on both of us, really; besides, there is a subpoena out for you as a witness, since you were the last person to see poor Tim alive."

Hal was confused; all this rather took his breath away; the word subpoena, even in that harmless connection, affected him disagreeably. He had met it before and had not liked it. Moreover, what was to become of Nigma, whom he had promised to take to the inquest?

She signaled to him that she had abandoned the idea, again saying aloud she had to be going; and this time—not withheld—she made her brief farewells and left.

As the door closed, Mildred looked at him with wide-open eyes.

"What an entrancing creature, Hal! Of course you are in love with her. Who could help it? Is it really all true about her being a pupil?"

"Yes, and I get paid ten dollars each time; and the unbelievable thing is that I know nothing about her, not even her name! I suppose I should be mad about her if I had anything to go on—but I haven't. I have never been any good at a one-sided love affair, Mildred; if there isn't the slightest reciprocity I soon lose interest. I am past the age of worshiping the unattainable, I suppose, but I do like her as a person; she is so good to look at, and has such a nice sense of humor."

Mildred's gray eyes were very penetrating; if there had been a lie lurking in the depths of Hal's they would have revealed it. Her darting scrutiny was reassuring; she loved Hal better than anyone in the world, though it had never

been expressed nor ever would. Much of his success had been due to her; she had mothered him through countless storms, asking nothing in return—and getting very little, save his rather casual dependence.

Dismissing Nigma from her mind and throwing herself on the divan she remarked that she had been through hell.

“For one thing I have come away completely disillusioned about Anne,” she said.

“Disillusioned?” Hal was amazed.

“She is one of the most selfish, cold-blooded, calculating women I have ever known,” went on Mildred. “And the more she liked me, the more she revealed her shallow little soul. For the first two days, of course, she was all nerves and clung to me with a kind of desperation. I like being clung to—it is my disposition, you know. But it was after she had pulled herself together that I began to dislike her. The only thought in her head is Tim’s money and how long it will take her to get it. You see, if they had not found his body it would have been necessary to wait interminably before the law would presume him dead. That was what Anne was dreading—that tremendous gap, possibly of several years, which really would have been very hard on her. A widow who wasn’t a widow, a husbandless wife who would have to more or less live on the charity of Bingy and the lawyers. The will, too, would have remained unknown all that time. Judge Vandenhoff, who drew it up, is adamant in keeping it to himself. Anne insisted on seeing him, but he told her he would not let it be opened until he knew definitely of Tim’s death, or had an order of court commanding him to do so. A dreadful old man, dressed up to look like a golfer and really a fiend! Appeals were wasted on him; he would not give us the slightest hint, though I believe that Anne is at least legally entitled to one third of Tim’s estate.”

Mildred stopped, and arranging a pillow under her head and stretching herself out at full length on the divan she breathed a happy sigh.

"Would you mind if I stayed here all the rest of my life?" she asked. "What a heavenly peace you always surround yourself with, Hal. Tell me how you do it."

"By keeping my heart like God's little garden, I suppose," he said. "But this is no time for our eternal rest, Mildred; there is a lot more to be said about Anne—I can see that."

Mildred made a little grimace.

"I can't tell you how shocked I was—on top of her endless whining about her financial position—when she rushed off with Sam Bird to see Tim's body where they had it in a horrible net. Was there anything in the world so cold-blooded!"

"But Felice went too, didn't she?"

Mildred nodded.

"Yes, she insisted on it, though I hope it was only in solicitude for her mother. Anne indeed was so jangled that perhaps she was hardly accountable for her actions. But anyhow, Felice went too and was apparently forced to identify the body along with the others. She came back utterly unstrung. It was then in a way that we first began to make friends. Hal, I like that girl; there is infinitely more to her than one would realize from her pretty doll face. And when the clash came between her and Anne, my whole heart went out to her."

"The clash—how do you mean?"

"When Felice broke it to her mother that she was going to lead her own life. Said she was twenty-one and free to do as she chose. Said she was going to get a job in New York and earn her own living, though she thought Anne should allow her a hundred dollars a month. Anne refused to allow her a cent, going on in a way that robbed me of

any last vestige of liking I had for her. It was then I rushed in and said I would take Felice under my wing, employ her myself at the shop, take her to live with me until she could make her own arrangements. It was a horrid scene; all of Anne's veneer seemed to come off in strips. Oh, odious! I never saw her again, and I hope I never shall. When she leaves for Europe in a few weeks, Felice will come to me. It shows what a level-headed little thing she is that she felt she should have no break with her mother—nor separate from her—while they were under all this newspaper searchlight. It is a wretched prospect for her in the meanwhile, but one can trust Bingy to alleviate all he can."

"Has he any chance, Mildred?"

"I should say not a speck. But who can ever tell about a girl? She is terribly lacerated and he is evidently a very comforting poultice. But I can't see her taking him as a lifelong poultice. Not, I mean, when she ceases to be lacerated and all this is forgotten."

Mildred paused. The subject had been talked out. Closing her eyes she remarked at random that her besetting sin was interesting herself in other people's affairs.

"Perhaps this is the time to make good resolutions," said Hal. "Suppose we cut the whole wretched business, Mildred, and go out to lunch together and talk about something far more interesting—ourselves."

"We haven't any choice," returned Mildred. "And we not only have to go out, but have to go at once. There is surely some place near here where you can hire a car?"

"But what about anything to eat?"

"We'll pick up some cheese and crackers at a passing grocery; we haven't time for anything else, Hal."

"Will I do for an inquest?" asked Hal, looking down at himself doubtfully. He was wearing his oldest suit.

But Mildred was not attending. She had risen from the divan and was moving in the direction of his bedroom.

"Go and get the car," she said. "I shall try to make myself presentable before you come back. Just toot for me, you know, unless you find me down there waiting for you."

Hal got his hat and departed, not very cheerfully, to rent a car. Yes, interesting herself in other people's affairs was Mildred's besetting sin. If she had not wanted to marry him to Felice she would never have given that party for the Reardons. And if she had never given that party for the Reardons he would never have gone to Idle Wyld. And not having gone to Idle Wyld there certainly would have been no cause now for him to attend this damned inquest!

And how like Mildred to be taking Felice to live with her. Always reaching out for trouble and involving harmless bystanders in miseries and complications. What if Jimmy took over-kindly to this arrangement? For one of the sweetest women in the world, Mildred was certainly the biggest fool he knew.

Chapter XII

AT THE Y. M. C. A. Hall, where the inquest was to be held, there was a big stir of people about the entrance and a general movement up the stairs as though to an entertainment. The hall was a two-story brick building containing a gymnasium on the ground floor, and one very large room above used apparently as a lodge room in turn by the various fraternal societies at Mandeville. It was a stuffy, ill-lighted place, entirely devoid of ventilation and oppressively decorated in red; and had been selected, so Hal overheard, to accommodate a crowd that far exceeded the capacity of the official courtroom. Although so large it was already nearly filled with people, among whom Hal noticed a noisy group of Portuguese, the women conspicuous by their bright, cheap finery, and the men by their swarthiness and excitement. Goose Creek was rejoicing over its fifty thousand dollars.

On a dais was an imposing armchair surmounted by a ridiculous tasseled canopy and flanked by a kitchen table, covered with a skimpy American flag, on which were pen and ink, notebooks, a Bible, and some official-looking papers held together with a rubber band. Below the dais was another kitchen table with two chairs, presumably reserved for the stenographer and the coroner's assistant. Beyond the table, toward the center of the room, was a considerable block of collapsible chairs, already nearly all occupied, and strictly reserved, as a notice said, for the press. Against the wall was ranged a series of red upholstered chairs, faded and worn-looking, which evidently deemed insufficient for the growing crowd were being re-

enforced by new rows of collapsible chairs, brought up by some young men from the gymnasium below.

Standing there, somewhat bewildered, their eyes simultaneously fell on four familiar faces at some little distance from them: Anne, Felice, Bingy, and Sam Bird, seated near the reporters and talking in the self-conscious way of those who feel themselves under observation. Mildred pressed Hal's arm, and with a common impulse they moved away to the further side of the room and sat down. It seemed more considerate not to accost Anne and Felice at such a trying moment; besides, too, they were withheld by a kind of shyness—almost a reluctance. As Mildred whispered to Hal she simply could not bring herself to greet Anne warmly, and to do less would hardly look well before all these gapping people.

The room filled more and more; there was a subdued undercurrent of talk, most of it about the immense reward and the luck of the dagoes at Goose Creek. Them wops getting all that! Gee, could you beat it! Fifty thousand bucks! Fifty thousand bucks, by gosh! A sudden hush announced the arrival of the coroner, who was preceded by a young man exclaiming authoritatively: "Make way, please! Make way for the coroner!" Everyone stood up.

The coroner followed with a brisk quick step like an arriving family doctor. He was a heavy-set, middle-aged man with a large, fretful face and retreating reddish hair. He hastened up the dais steps, slumped into the big arm-chair, and then looked about carefully for a place to lay his hat and the small shabby black bag he carried. A woman stenographer had unobtrusively taken her place at the lower table, the young man who had ushered in the coroner seated himself opposite her. An obliging bystander said he was the coroner's assistant, Mr. Scollie. A deputy sheriff, risen from nowhere, with a star on his civilian blue clothes, all at once revealed the fact that the hard-featured

citizens seated behind him were the coroner's jury. There was a general hush, a few surreptitious spits, a grating of chairs and feet. Except for the deputy sheriff and a cluster of people standing at the entrance, everyone was seated.

"The hearing of the inquest is opened," said the coroner. Then he mumbled off something about "hurriedly assembled at an inconvenient time," and how a jury of nine good men and true to wit mumble-mumble, having been already duly sworn mumble-mumble, and in accordance with mumble-mumble, and now mumble-mumble.

After reciting all this, which might have been a Hindoo prayer for anything most of his hearers knew to the contrary, he cleared his throat and addressed the jury.

"Gentlemen," he said in his ordinary voice, "I must make you my apologies for having called you at such an unusual hour, but as this sad matter is scarcely more than a formality, and any delay might seriously inconvenience the arrangements that have been made for the funeral services to be held on Sunday, I am sure I have your indulgence in showing this consideration to the family of the late John T. Reardon, who held such a high and distinguished place in your midst."

Hardly pausing for breath, and with a hurrying air, he added: "Call Mr. Bingham Stott."

Bingy advanced to the dais, was sworn, and stood waiting while the coroner studied some typewritten notes he had produced from his pocket.

"I understand that you were at Idle Wyld on the night of Mr. Reardon's disappearance?"

"I was."

"A guest, staying the night?"

"Yes sir."

"Who comprised the party at Idle Wyld?"

"Mr. and Mrs. Reardon, Miss Felice Hamilton, Mr. and Mrs. James Hare, Mr. Curwen, the novelist, and myself."

"Did anything unusual occur that day or evening?"

"No sir, it was an ordinary week-end party."

"Did the late Mr. Reardon show any signs of depression or act in any way that might lead you to think he was laboring under any emotion or excitement?"

"No sir, he was in excellent spirits, and we passed an extremely pleasant evening."

"Thank you, that will do," said the coroner. "Call Mrs. John T. Reardon."

There was a hush of expectancy. Anne had risen; she was in widow's weeds, which made a startling contrast to her pale and beautiful face. Bingy had hastened to her and ceremoniously escorted her to the front.

"Your name?" asked the coroner.

"Anne Reardon—the wife of John T. Reardon."

Leaning down, the coroner handed her a Bible. She was sworn.

"You were at home at Idle Wyld on the night of May 30th—Decoration Day?"

"Yes."

"Entertaining with your husband the little party described by the last witness?"

"Yes sir."

"You noticed nothing unusual about your husband that evening?"

"No sir."

"He was in his usual spirits?"

"Yes, he seemed to be enjoying it very much."

"When did you last see him alive?"

"When I went to bed and we said good-night. We have separate rooms, though they adjoin."

"Did you hear any sound or movement in his room that night?"

"No, I was tired and slept soundly."

At this the coroner turned his eyes towards his assistant,

though any connection between that young man and Anne sleeping soundly seemed far from obvious.

"Have Detective Garvin step forward, please."

Detective Garvin stepped forward. He was a strapping plain-clothes man and carried a japanned tin box under his arm. Unlocking it, he produced a wrinkled bathing suit of blue and white stripes and held it up deliberately for general inspection before laying it out on the stenographer's table. Then he moved a little to one side but still maintaining his official air, reminding Hal of a magnificent dog that had been told to guard his master's glove.

The coroner, again turning towards Anne, asked her if she recognized this bathing suit.

Anne gave a little shudder; heads craned about her. In a low voice she answered:

"Yes, it belonged to my husband."

"Were all his bathing suits marked with his initials like this one?"

"No, this was a present; I don't recall who gave it him."

"Have you anything to add to your testimony that might in any way elucidate this very sad affair?"

"No sir. It was a lovely warm night, and I suppose he went for a bathe."

"Had he ever done such a thing before?"

"Yes, when he couldn't sleep. I had often begged him not to."

"Thank you," said the coroner. "Call Miss Felice Hamilton."

There was more hushed expectancy, more craning necks. Felice, also in black, made her way to the table. She was as calm as though alone in the room. She gave her name; she took the oath; she stood there like some charming school-girl who had been called to receive a prize.

"You have heard the testimony of the two previous witnesses?"

"Yes sir."

"Does your experience confirm it in everything?"

"Yes sir."

"You noticed nothing abnormal about Mr. Reardon that night?"

"No sir."

"Can you identify this bathing suit?"

"Yes, I have seen my stepfather wear it."

"That will do, thank you. Call Mr. Harrison Curwen."

Hal stepped into the limelight. He was grave and self-possessed. Thank God, it would not last long.

"You were one of the guests at Idle Wyld that night of May 30th?"

"Yes sir; I remained the night."

"Were you the last person to see the deceased alive?"

"I am told I was."

"Where?"

"He came up to my bedroom before I undressed. We talked for a while, and then he went away."

"Was there anything unusual in this talk? Anything to indicate he was under any emotion or stress?"

"Yes, there was—in a way; at least, he said he had something of a very important nature to tell me."

Sensation.

The reporters all sat up.

In the ensuing hush, a voice at the back of the room suddenly became audible: "Fifty thousand dollars to a bunch of snotty wops! My, it beats the old Louisiana!"

The interruption was quelled by Detective Garvin, formidable and booming.

"Silence! Silence in the court!"

The titter died. One could have heard a pin drop.

"Narrate your conversation, please," resumed the coroner, addressing Hal.

"It never reached any point, your Honor. He never told me anything. It was as though he had to nerve himself first—and when it seemed to be coming—he was called away."

"How do you mean—called away?"

"By the telephone; there was one in my room—a house telephone."

"Then he left?"

"Yes sir, he left."

"And never came back?"

"No, he never came back, though he had said he would."

"You expected him to come back?"

"No sir I can't say I did definitely. I assumed he had changed his mind; decided, perhaps, after all, that the matter was of too private a nature to divulge."

"Had you any surmise as to what it was?"

"No sir. He gave me no indication at all."

"When he left, had you the slightest anticipation that he might do away with himself?"

"Not the slightest. I am convinced this was an accident—that he overtaxed himself somehow."

"And so, when he failed to return, you were not in the least disturbed?"

"No sir, not the least."

"Then you went to bed?"

"Yes sir, I went to bed."

"Thank you, Mr. Curwen. That is all."

The ordeal was over.

"Call Gus Silver!"

A short, dark, thickset man of about fifty clumped to the foot of the dais. His thick black hair was faintly streaked with gray, and his brush of a moustache was similarly threaded with white. He looked an honest, worthy

fellow, and his weather-beaten face was not without a kind of dignity. That he was in a state of intense excitement became evident when he was handed the Bible. His hands were shaking so much that he used both to grasp it like a stage drunkard.

Where was he the night of Friday, June 4th?

"It was like this, your Honor," he blurted out. "Hearing of a rayward of fifty thousand dollars for the body of Mr. Reardon, me and my brother here——"

"Not so fast, please. Yesterday night you were out in your boat searching for the body?"

"Yes, gentleman, me and my brother Tony Silva, and my cousin Yezus—Yezus Silva—we are partners in everything, we three—and as soon as we heerd about the rayward——"

"Hold on, hold on! You were out in your boat with——" the coroner hesitated—"this Yezus Silver your cousin, and Antonio Silver, your brother?"

"Yes, gentleman, Yezus was in the bow with a boat hook, while me and——"

"How was the corpse dressed?"

"Wore that," said Gus, pointing dramatically at the bathing suit on the table. "That was all it had on. We knew it was Mr. Reardon at once, by the age and build of him, and then the letters on the bathing suit. Yezus here, he sang out first——"

"Never mind who sang out first. You brought back the body?"

"Yes sir, we brought back the body."

"How?"

"We had took a net. It is hard with bodies floating in the Sound; we have picked them up time and again, and are sorter used to it, you might say."

"And what did you do with it?"

"Towed it back to Goose Creek, and then my son,

Eddie, he took his Buick car and went to Idle Wyld, where he knew Mr. Bird. Eddie wanted to make sure there was no joker about the rayward."

The audience broke into merriment, which was sternly hushed.

"What happened next?"

"Mr. Bird, he come back with Eddie and made sure it was Mr. Reardon in the net. And he said, sure, we would get the rayward, and went back with Eddie to tell Mrs. Reardon and the young lady and bring them up. They came in their own car and said, yes, it was Mr. Reardon."

"You have seen the body in the mortuary?"

"Yes sir, I helped bring him there—me and Yezus and Antonio."

Everybody waited for the coroner to dismiss Gus Silver, but the words were not forthcoming. Instead he said, looking troubled: "Hasn't that cousin of yours any other name? I don't like it in my records."

"Whose name?"

"Your cousin—Jesus is no kind of name for an American citizen, and it is noted here he is naturalized."

Gus looked depressed.

"That's all the name he has, your Honor—just Jaysus, as you call it in English. All the boys are named that in Madeira when they haven't no father, and their mother weren't married."

Again there was a ripple of merriment that had to be suppressed.

"In this court we will call him J. for short," said the coroner. "Call Antonio Silver."

Another swarthy fisherman came sheepishly to the front. He was a bigger man than Gus, but just as weather-beaten and seamed. Smiling amiably, he revealed very white teeth.

"You have heard all the foregoing, Mr. Silver?"

"Yes, your Honor."

"You were in the same boat with your brother Gus Silver and J. Silver on the night of Friday, June 4th?"

"Yes sir."

"You were there when the body was found and helped to bring it back in the net?"

"Yes sir."

"Do you recognize this bathing suit?"

"Yes sir, it was the only thing the body had on."

"Thank you. You can stand down, Mr. Silver. Call J. Silver."

Amid titters, J. Silver made his way to the table.

He too was grizzled and dark, with the same open, attractive face. The coroner became almost singsong in getting his confirmation of the others' story. After saying "Yes sir," four times, J. Silver was dismissed from the proceedings.

"Call Mr. Samuel Bird."

Bald and benign, with his aureole of scanty white hair clustering about his shiny head, Sam Bird advanced ceremoniously. In a mellow voice, as melodious and clear as a bell, he submitted to the preliminaries, and then stood erect and suave, facing the coroner. Though he was an old frontiersman, who had spent most of his life in the deserts of New Mexico and Arizona, there was an odd distinction in his appearance. His air was so untroubled, his voice had such a pleasant cadence, he was so courteous and proud—and so innately a gentleman in spite of his queer old black clothes.

"You were employed by the deceased?"

"Yes sir—in a way."

"What do you mean by 'in a way'?"

"Mr. Reardon and I had been friends since 1896 when we were prospectors together out West. When he asked

me to come and spend the rest of my days at Idle Wyld, it was I who insisted I should have something to do. That is how I came to keep the lodge and be on the pay roll."

"You knew the deceased very well, then?"

"More than that, sir. He was the best friend I ever had in the world."

"You identified this body as his?"

"Yes, as far as it was possible in the state it was in."

Pausing, and indicating the bathing suit, he added: "That seemed to me absolutely conclusive."

"But the body conformed in every respect to that of the deceased?"

"Yes sir, it conformed in every respect."

"Thank you, Mr. Bird."

With a gesture the coroner indicated that the witness was dismissed. Then, looking at his typewritten notes and seeming to find nothing more, he cleared his throat. The jurymen, shuffling their feet, felt that the end was in sight.

"I think we have heard all that is necessary, gentlemen," said the coroner, turning towards them. "It seems scarcely necessary for you to leave the box to deliberate, if, as I assume——"

—He was interrupted by a young man, very tall and thin, who rose to his feet near the reporters' table and whined out something inaudible. A perfectly composed young man, making sounds that reminded Hal of a gull on a rock. However, the coroner had heard better. He raised his head fretfully and said: "Who do you represent, do you say?"

"The Old Ironsides Life Insurance Company, your Honor. I have an important witness I should like to have called."

The coroner looked more fretful than ever.

"You are a member of the New York Bar?"

The young man, in his whining voice, answered yanh

yanh yanh yanh yanh—and that he had been instructed to represent the interests of the Old Ironsides Life Insurance Company.

“I am at a loss to understand why we should waste any further time on this case,” said the coroner. “The evidence seems altogether conclusive——”

“I fear I must differ from your Honor in that,” said the young man. “At any rate I should like my witness’s testimony read into the record.”

“Call him,” said the coroner.

“Unfortunately, he has been delayed, and I must beg your indulgence to keep the proceedings open for a few minutes.”

“This is most annoying,” said the coroner. “Your witness should have been here. This inquiry, besides, has been virtually concluded.”

He stared reprovingly at the young man, who, abashed but tenacious, whined out yanh yanh yanh yanh yanh.

“If he is not here in five minutes . . .” began the coroner, taking out his watch.

But the sentence was never finished. There was a commotion at the back of the court, sounds of hurried steps and raised voices, and two new arrivals, not a little flurried, pushed their way to where the young lawyer was beckoning to them. One was a slender gray man—gray hair, gray clothes, and a gray overcoat over his arm; a keen-faced gray man, dignified in spite of his jostling passage through the crowd. His companion was a smooth, dark young Jew, with horn spectacles.

The young lawyer had grown emboldened by the appearance of his witness. His extremely deprecatory manner dropped from him. In an authoritative way, though still nasal and whining, he asked that Doctor Ely be put on the stand.

By this time the room had grown tense with anticipa-

tion. Even the cackling Portuguese subsided into silence. The whisperings, nudgings, and startled looks were all asking the same question. Who was Doctor Ely, and what could he possibly have to say in a matter so definitely and conclusively finished?

Chapter XIII

DOCTOR ELY, who seemed familiar with court procedure, said that instead of swearing he would make an affirmation, which was a sort of denatured oath without even two per cent. of God and no Bible at all.

"May I question the witness?" asked the representative of the insurance company.

"Yes, certainly—but please stick to the point. I don't wish to delay the inquiry, and it is getting late."

"I shall be as short as possible," said the whining young man. Then he turned to his witness.

"Your name?"

"Charles Mowatt Ely."

"Your profession?"

"I am a dental surgeon."

"Am I not justified in saying that you occupy a very high place in the professional world?"

The doctor, with an air of denying it, answered drily that he had been a practising dental surgeon for thirty-four years; held Harvard and Pennsylvania degrees; was a lecturer and examiner at Columbia University; was on the New York State Examining Board; and was the author of four technical books, one of which on Riggs' Disease had been translated into every European language and was used as a textbook in the universities of Upsala, Tokio, Padua, Barcelona, Warsaw, and Buenos Aires.

The young lawyer seemed far more gratified by all this than his witness.

"You knew Mr. John T. Reardon?"

"Yes sir, he was a patient of mine."

"Over any length of time, Doctor Ely?"

"Twelve years."

"And in the course of all that time he came to you for any dental treatment he required?"

"Yes sir."

"Had you, in the course of caring for Mr. Reardon's teeth, any occasion to have them X-rayed?"

"Yes sir; I regard the use of X-rays as one of the greatest essentials of my profession."

"Were such X-ray negatives always filed in your office?"

"Yes sir—filed, dated, and retained for reference."

The lawyer, enjoying the sensation he was causing, took out his wallet and extracted a small envelope which he passed to Doctor Ely.

"Will you kindly state to the coroner and jury what that envelope contains?"

Doctor Ely deliberately took out some small black films, and as deliberately placing a pince-nez on his nose, examined them by holding them up, one at a time, against the light.

"These are eleven X-ray photographs of Mr. Reardon's upper and lower jaw, taken about a year ago, when I was disturbed at his increasing pyorrhœa."

The room had grown very still. Where was all this leading to?

"This morning, at my request, did you examine the body of the man that is supposed to be Mr. John T. Reardon—in the mortuary here?"

"I did not examine the body; examination of bodies lies outside my province; but I made a careful examination of the teeth of the corpse."

"And what was your decision?"

"That it was not the corpse of Mr. John T. Reardon."

The whole room broke into a sudden buzz. Even the

coroner, who had been so lethargic, started as though he had been galvanized.

Hal said afterwards this was the most suffocating moment of his life.

"Kindly describe the teeth of the corpse," continued the lawyer.

"Their salient characteristics were three in gold; first lower right molar; second upper right bicuspid; third molar on left lower jaw."

"Had your patient, John T. Reardon, a single gold tooth in his head?"

"No, sir, he had not a single gold tooth in his head."

"And the corpse you examined at the mortuary had three?"

"Yes, sir, this corpse had three, which were as I have described."

A shiver went through the room. It was a breathless moment.

The lawyer continued: "I gather, from my very imperfect knowledge of the subject, though guided by the X-ray photographs you have just seen, that Mr. Reardon had splendid teeth?"

"Yes sir, extremely good for a man of his age. Except for one tooth missing on the lower left and one missing on the upper right and a porcelain pivot on his left cuspid he had a very good set of teeth."

"And to repeat—he did not have a single gold tooth in his head?"

"No sir."

"And the corpse you examined this morning had three gold teeth?"

"Yes sir; the corpse I examined this morning had three."

"Then it is not Mr. Reardon at all?"

"No sir, it is not Mr. Reardon."

The young lawyer looked up at the coroner.

"Has your Honor any questions he would like to put to this witness? Or has the jury?"

The coroner pondered. From being fretful, he had grown absorbingly interested.

"Permit me to see the X-ray photographs, please."

He studied them. Being a doctor, he knew what he was about. Passed to the jury, the little black slips made their way slowly along one line and down the other and were then returned. They might have been buttons for anything they conveyed to the jury.

"Thank you, Doctor Ely, we are very greatly obliged to you," said the lawyer. "I will now call Mr. Isidore Eisner, the well-known professional X-ray photographer of New York."

Mr. Isidore Eisner was called.

"Your business is that of taking X-ray photographs for dentists and surgeons?"

"Yes sir, I have offices in the Applebaum Building on East Fifty-eighth Street."

"Are you accustomed to photograph Doctor Ely's patients?"

"Yes sir, I have made X-ray photographs of his patients for the last six or seven years."

"Do you recognize these?" As he spoke the lawyer handed him the little squares of celluloid. Isidore Eisner examined them carefully one by one. He was evidently an exact, methodical man who took nothing for granted.

"I took these myself for Doctor Ely about a year ago for a patient of his named John T. Reardon."

"Did Mr. Reardon go to your office on East Fifty-eighth Street?"

"Yes sir, he came with Doctor Ely, who wished to see the films as soon as I had developed them."

"Did Doctor Ely introduce you to Mr. Reardon?"

"Yes sir, he did."

"Do these photographs show any gold teeth at all?"

"No sir, they cannot show what was not there. Mr. Reardon had no such thing in his mouth."

The lawyer, unpleasantly triumphant, turned to the coroner.

"I think we have established our contention, your Honor. However, if the Court should not be satisfied, my clients do not intend to rest there. We certainly don't mean to have the body of an unknown man fobbed off on us at a cost of three quarters of a million dollars."

The coroner raised his eyebrows in inquiry.

"Nearly a year ago Mr. John T. Reardon insured his life in our company for that sum. Has your Honor any questions to ask my two witnesses before they are dismissed?"

The coroner pondered.

The jury, stirring in their places, showed signs of impatience.

At this moment Bingy came forward, with a quick step and a perturbed manner. Might he speak?

The coroner, still pondering, indicated that he might.

"In view of Doctor Ely's evidence, which was as unexpected as it was conclusive, I am requested to state on behalf of Mrs. Reardon, Miss Felice Hamilton, and Mr. Samuel Bird that they feel they have been in error in identifying this body as Mr. Reardon's. Doctor Ely has just informed us that the gold teeth he referred to could not easily have been seen, and that the configuration of the dead man's mouth was not unlike that of Mr. Reardon's. Given the painful circumstances of such an attempted identification, which took place at night with the aid of an electric torch, it will be realized how easily this unfortunate mistake occurred."

The coroner nodded.

"Do all three unreservedly withdraw their previous identification then?" he asked.

"Yes, your Honor—though perhaps an expression from yourself confirming the good faith in which they have acted might offset the unpleasant impression conveyed by the insurance company's attorney."

Bingy glared at the young lawyer, who smiled venomously and would have spoken had it not been for the coroner.

"No discussion, please, gentlemen," said the latter curtly. "The mistaken evidence will be stricken from the records. I have not the slightest doubt but that the evidence of Mrs. Reardon, Miss Hamilton, and Mr. Samuel Bird was given in entire good faith."

Bingy bowed and retired.

"Your verdict will have to be 'body of an unknown man found drowned,' I presume," said the coroner, addressing the jury.

One of them rose to his feet; he must have been the foreman.

"Yes, your Honor. That is our verdict. Body of an unknown man found drowned."

The coroner passed it on to the woman stenographer. It reminded Hal of firemen relaying buckets at a fire. "Body of an unknown man found drowned."

At this moment a piercing feminine wail rose from the back of the room. In the confusion that followed, which was increased by the general exodus, Hal could not learn what had happened. Was it Anne? With Mildred clinging to his arm they pressed their way through the mob. But it was not Anne. Tittering voices passed along the news that it was one of the dago women screaming about the fifty thousand dollars. In this undignified way the pro-

ceedings terminated as far as Hal and Mildred were concerned, who followed the outgoing throng and began to look about for their car. Neither wished to see Anne or the others. An encounter just then would have been painful. They walked quickly to avoid such a possibility, caring little whether they found their car or not so long as they could gain security.

But their man had been watching for them and overtook them at a run. He had parked the car on another street, he said. Had they not better follow him to where it was? There was such a mix-up of cars here that it was like getting away from the Metropolitan. They followed him, silent and tired. It was only in the retrospect that they realized what a strain this inquest had been on them. They had seated themselves in the car and were about to drive off when a resounding voice called out: "Hold on there, hold on!" A man appeared at Hal's window, vaguely familiar, whose face seemed almost convulsed.

"You're Tim's friend, aren't you? You're the same Mr. Curwen that Tim Reardon introduced me to down on the waterside on Decoration Day?" The words vibrated. He was a powerful, heavy-shouldered fellow, with lungs of brass. My God, it was Carl—Carl Pipf!

"Yes, I am Mr. Curwen. I remember you very well—you are Carl Pipf."

"You are the only man I can turn to in all this," said Carl Pipf. He was so moved that his voice came out in sudden barks. "We were kind of handed over to you by Tim, Mr. Curwen. You remember how he said that? The meaning way he said it? We was to take you for our boss, failing him. Well, I want to tell you, Mr. Curwen, sir, this was all fixed up. Yes, sir, all fixed up—and I don't care who hears me say it. I knew it wasn't Tim's body, but who was I to go against all them four with the coroner in their pocket?"

His face grew more convulsed than ever as he snarled out: "I tell you it was all fixed up! It was all arranged beforehand."

"What is the good of making all this fuss now?" asked Hal, who was eager to be on his way home. "It is all over, and if anything I say goes with you, Carl, you'll stop all this kind of wild talk."

"I am not myself; I know I am clean off my chump," said Carl, passing a bewildered hand across his brow. "It was seeing you that brought it up, and me all bursting with it, and nigh crazy. But it isn't all over, Mr. Curwen—not on your life it ain't. It is just beginning—if it costs me every cent I have in the world. If Tim's been done away with, I am going to find him, or his poor murdered bones. I don't intend to stop till I get somebody in the electric chair—and I know mighty well who that somebody is, with her red hair and her——"

"For God's sake, shut up!" cried Hal. "I am ashamed to have listened to as much as I have. Get on to yourself, Carl; all this will be scare-headed in the yellow press if you don't look out."

Again that bewildered hand, that enormous, bewildered hand, gnarled by a lifetime of toil—passed across Carl's brow.

"You have taken me up all wrong, Mr. Curwen, sir. I didn't mean that at all. What I meant was that I was going to stay on the job, and may I come and see you if I run down anything?"

"Yes—if you keep it to yourself. This kind of going on makes me sick."

Carl blinked. He was a hard-hitting, two-fisted type that was unused to apologies. They came out chokingly. What was Mr. Curwen's address—that was what he wanted to know. When Mr. Curwen, sir, saw him again he would have nothing to complain of.

Hal, somewhat grudgingly, gave his address. It seemed the only way to get rid of Carl Pipf and his distempered suspicions.

"What a madman!" exclaimed Hal as they drove away. "Not a very pleasant prospect—to find that hulking Viking camped on my doorstep—is it?"

But Mildred did not smile. She was thinking, and the effort made her frown.

"I am not sure that he isn't right," she said.

"Oh, Mildred!"

"Not about Anne—I don't mean about Anne," she resumed. "But all this we saw today did have a peculiar look."

"You don't mean that it was fixed?"

"I can understand Anne identifying any dead body if it put Tim's fortune within her reach," she said. "But what staggers me, Hal, is how Felice could lend herself to anything of the kind."

"It staggers me too," said Hal.

"And old Mr. Bird—he was as positive as the rest, remember."

Hal had to admit that also.

"Yet the biggest puzzle to me is the bathing suit," he went on. "It was Tim's beyond any question. What was it doing on that strange dead man?"

Their eyes met in uneasy questioning.

"It looks very black to me," said Mildred.

Hal assented.

"It didn't get there of itself," he said.

Chapter XIV

LIFE had been moving so fast for Hal that he was thankful when a lull came. The lull was entirely of his own making, for the whole Reardon affair had become so distasteful to him that he avoided references to it in the press, and alleged several previous engagements by way of avoiding Mildred. Not that he wanted to avoid her in any general way. He adored Mildred, and needed the stimulus of the one person who liked him and approved of him without reserve. But he wanted her to make friends with Jimmy first and recede somewhat from the Reardons. Or rather from Anne, Felice, and Bingy. In the swift current of New York life all these would swirl away, or at least tend to become less engrossing.

The lull, in fact, would have been a greater success had it not been for Nigma. Nigma came often. Her love of literature had received a great impetus with the Reardon case. She came almost with regularity, and seemed very disappointed by the lull, and that Hal had seen neither Mildred nor Bingy. In the middle of a sentence, when she ought to have been thinking about the difference between who and whom, she would gaze reflectively at the ceiling and speculate anew on Tim's disappearance, and any conceivable share that Anne Reardon might have had in it.

Tim's disappearance had remained a profound mystery; it was bracketed with that of Dorothy Moore's as two of the most impenetrable cases on record. Nigma's interest was inexhaustible. One morning, coloring like a school-

girl avowing an escapade, she confessed to having gone into Mildred's shop and bought an ash tray from Felice Hamilton. Yes, Felice had been there, and Nigma had watched outside until the other saleswoman was engaged, and thus found a chance of making her request direct to Felice.

"You hadn't half told me how lovely that girl is," she said to Hal. "I have never seen anybody like her in my life—such a faultlessly lovely young blonde; such an absolute perfection of the golden-haired English type. She would only have to raise her finger to get into the Ziegfeld Follies. I wonder why she doesn't do it, instead of drudging away there in that dark old shop for half nothing. And such a really charming creature too, though as shy as a bird! And so sensitive, so exquisite—I can't understand why you didn't lose your head about her; you must be made of puppy-dogs' tails—like the little boys. If I were a man and once saw a girl like that, I would walk over red-hot plowshares to get her!"

"I am doing all my red-hot walking for you," said Hal. "My feet are nearly burned off already, and it would make angels weep to read my sad little pedometer."

"Pooh!" exclaimed Nigma. "I am just sealskin hair to you; you might be in an aëroplane for anything else you notice about me. And as for my qualities of mind and——"

"It's that ten-dollar bill," interrupted Hal ruefully, glancing at it as though it were a toad on his desk. "It is worse than an old lady in black jet sitting between us. Besides, I don't want to love anybody—not to hurt. It is so disturbing to love anybody, and it takes such a fearful lot of lies—at least for men. Really, Nigma, this friendship of ours is one of the pleasantest things I have ever known. I can be grumpy, I can be frank; I never think of you much when you aren't here. And I can bask so happily in all the delicious radiations of you without being

worried or anxious or jealous. It is not easy to bring oneself to admit it—but it's the fact."

Nigma smiled.

"You mean we are like soldiers in a rest camp, Mr. Curwen? We are being bathed and exercised and entertained to bring back our shattered morale?"

"My morale would be improved if you could bring yourself to call me Hal. Will you, Nigma?"

"I should like it; after all, I always think of you as Hal."

"And bring that to a bad end," went on Hal, pointing at the ten-dollar bill. "To think of being paid for anything as delightful as your visits. It is horrible."

"No, no! It is the one thing that makes it possible for me to come here."

"But my morale? It would do a lot for it."

"Perhaps too much! The rest troops must not get out of hand, or where should we be? No, I like you just as you are—Hal."

"What a funny thing—your going to Mildred's shop," said Hal, returning to a thought he had not yet had the chance to follow up.

"Oh, I live near there, you know; I pass it nearly every day. Doesn't it seem strange that after meaning nothing to me at all, except a lot of lovely old furniture, that shop should suddenly become the setting of people I am passionately interested in?"

"You live near there?"

At last here was a hint of that secret life of which he knew nothing.

Nigma looked the least bit put out, and then her eyes sparkled mischievously.

"Oh, yes, I live at the corner."

The corner! It was only by degrees that Hal realized it was a firehouse at the corner. He had passed the shining

engine hundreds of times, and all those gay red buckets and rows of helmets on the walls.

"Of course, you mean next to the firehouse?"

She laughed outright.

"I am the firemen's mascot," she exclaimed. "I sleep in a basket and slide down with them to the engine. It is terribly exciting—sliding into one's clothes and then riding off in a brass helmet."

She evidently did not mean to tell him anything. Not at all sure he had not been delicately snubbed—and had perhaps deserved it—Hal returned to the study of her manuscript. She was certainly improving, some of it was quite good.

"Please don't think I was prying," he remarked suddenly, looking up. "On the whole I have been pretty good in respecting your incognita, haven't I?"

"You have been a perfect dear," she exclaimed. "I really do live down there somewhere, but Hal dear—when I do tell you—I want to tell you everything."

Her hand fell on his, and she pressed down on it warmly. It was the briefest of gestures, yet it seemed to establish a new relation between them—that and the "dear." Not wishing to impair it—it was as filmy as a soap bubble—Hal went on, though inwardly glowing, with the work in hand. "Commenced," you know, always implied something that had started and would be brought to a conclusion. Now "begin"—

The lull, already threatened by a number of unanswered telephone calls in Hal's letter box, came to an end rather unexpectedly. It was at a dinner at the Oliver Tredwells', a large and resplendent dinner given in honor of some foreign diplomats who had just arrived on these shores on a financial mission. Like most financial missions it was with the idea of paying less than they owed and making

up the balance with subdued insults in lieu of cash. However, Mrs. Tredwell, who had always made a point of entertaining distinguished foreign visitors, and who felt, as a daughter of the Knickerbockers, that something was due to them for the well-meant but trying hospitality of the City Hall, always softened this ordeal by giving a dinner afterwards. Hal, who had but the faintest acquaintance with Mrs. Tredwell, was presumably asked as a well-groomed and dancing representative of American culture, or perhaps because the warm weather had played havoc with the youth of the Four Hundred.

Hal accepted the invitation, which had been wrongly addressed and gone astray, in an unusual spirit of gratification. Mrs. Tredwell was a very great lady, and he was flattered to have won her notice. Besides, her house was one of the most imposing in New York, and Hal thought it would make a splendid setting for a crime or a burglary in one of his future books. So he went, flattered and professionally intent, and was not a little surprised to find that Jimmy and Mildred had also been invited. Though of course she did go everywhere. Mildred was a marvel.

So many people were there that Hal had hardly more than an opportunity to shake hands with her. At the dinner, which was at a series of little tables, she sat so far away from him that he could detect no more than the back of her head. But after the dinner—and some tiresome speeches—as they moved away to the ballroom where swarms of new guests were arriving, he sought her out and took a seat beside her. She was looking extremely well, extremely handsome and distinguished. She was in her right setting in such a house: it enhanced her, made her look regal—her shoulders and bosom were superb. Her smile warmed at the sight of him. When they had not met for some time there was always a kind of effulgence in her face at the sight of him, a lovely tenderness. Unlike most women, who would have chided

him for his neglect, she gave him that look and welcomed him.

"So many things have happened since I saw you last, I hardly know where to begin," she said. Then, before he could answer, she added: "Perhaps you don't want me to begin? Perhaps you would rather talk about international debts and tell me how many poties make a zoty."

"No, no! Just wanted to burble how splendid you look to-night."

"I have been having an awfully bad week," said Mildred, visibly elated at the compliment. "I suppose you don't even know that Felice came to work for me at the shop?"

"Yes, I did hear it. Still not a word about Tim, is there?"

"No, nothing. He has vanished off the earth."

"Is Anne all alone at Idle Wyld?"

"Yes, things got acuter and acuter between them—between Anne and Felice. Anne is busy packing up, anyhow. She is going back to Paris."

"Then what was awful about your week? You have dropped Anne altogether, haven't you?"

"Haven't set eyes on her since the inquest, though she wrote me rather a touching little note. But why get tangled up with her again, especially when she is so soon leaving?—though of course I answered."

"Those hysterical, high-strung women are always trying to have anything to do with," said Hal. "So poor little Felice got sick of it, did she?"

"I was prepared to be as good as gold to that kid," said Mildred. "Keep her in my house and all that: mother her, you know; be the sunshine of her shadowed little life."

"Well?"

"After three days she decided she hated it. And you mustn't think it had anything to do with Jimmy, because it hadn't. Jimmy is a reformed character for the time being;

you simply would not know him! If he saw Lady Godiva walking on the other side of the street, he wouldn't even turn his head. Of course, it is too good to last, but I can't tell you how pleasant it has been. Jimmy is a born lover, only he doesn't usually find scope enough at home. Well, as I was saying, it had nothing to do with Jimmy. She simply found it unendurable, though she had the decency to ascribe it to her timidity and shyness. She does suffer with strangers, that is true enough—but she put it on, too. Anyhow, she left—though she comes every day to the shop.”

“But where does she live now? It is not easy for such a good-looking girl to be on her own.”

“She found some kind of Young Professional Women's Hostel in Twelfth Street. Young professional women means really that they are ladies, and not shop girls nor servants. One of those Social Register charities that people like Mrs. Tredwell get up. Descendants of old families learning wood carving, or making batik, or painting lamp shades. You know the kind of place—everything in extremely nice taste, with a panelled common room and everything reminiscent of Oxford, even to a buttery. I was a little put out at first, but then I realized she would be far happier with girls of her own age, and really much better looked after than she would be in my house. It is as respectable as a nunnery, and every bit as strict. Only——”

Mildred broke off. Her face was troubled.

“Only what?”

“Well—she has left *that*.”

“You mean left the hostel?”

“Yes, and very slyly, without letting me know. Allowed men to escort her back there from my house, and then pretended to go in. I learned it by accident. Wanted to find her one night, and was told she had gone away, days and days before, leaving no address.”

Chapter XV

"WHAT an extraordinary thing for her to do!" said Hal. "What was her explanation? Surely you talked to her about it?"

"I had to. After all, in a way, she is in my charge."

"And what did she say?"

"I hardly know how to express it. Delicately defiant—no apologies whatever. For all her Dresden china prettiness she is a very determined young woman underneath. The hostel was too strict; said she wanted to sink or swim in her own way and feel perfectly free. Indicated it was nobody's business where she lived, and that if I bothered her too much about it she would chuck the shop altogether. But all this by inference, of course, and in her clotted-cream voice. Said, if need be, she could earn far more money posing for artists."

"A sort of threat, really?"

"Yes, that was what it amounted to."

"When did all this happen, Mildred?"

"It was only last night we found she wasn't at the hostel at all and today after lunch I had this little talk with her. You mustn't think I was not extremely kind about it; she had much better have a bit of my protection than none at all. If she once got swallowed up in Greenwich Village it would be the end of her."

"Then she won her point—to live where she pleases, without your knowing where, or anything about it?"

"I had no choice, Hal. As I said before, I thought it would be better for her to have a bit of my protection rather than nothing at all."

"But she will go on working at the shop?"

"Yes, that seemed to be entirely understood. Then, feeling I was in rather deep waters, I telephoned to Bingy."

"Well?"

"He went up in the air! I am not sure it was a wise thing to do at all—to tell him. But it was natural to try to divide the responsibility with somebody. In spite of all I could do he said he would see her and insist on her going back to the hostel."

"Did he see her?"

"I am afraid he meant to wait for her when she left the shop at six. I warned him against it; it is a dangerous thing trying to coerce girls of that age. But the talk of her posing had upset him frightfully."

At this moment they were disturbed; one of Mildred's dinner companions, a heel-clicking foreigner, came up to ask her for a dance. Hal, feeling that he should do something to earn his bread and butter, got himself introduced to several young women. The music and the floor were perfect, though the two orchestras—succeeding each other with scarcely a pause—made the dancing somewhat arduous. Once Mildred had begun to dance it was hard to get near her again, though he managed to secure one waltz. In the course of it she begged him to go home with her and Jimmy at midnight. No, she was not going to stay for the supper; working girls went home at midnight, and would her boy friend be waiting for her at that hour? The boy friend said he would. Her request had been made so pressingly that he could not refuse; moreover, she said she had a lot more to say.

Later, and in buoyant spirits, they all returned to East Nineteenth Street in a taxi. Whatever rift there had been between Mildred and Jimmy had wholly disappeared. Mildred was in an angelic humor, and Jimmy had drunk enough champagne to be extremely amusing. Ordinarily

he was rather a silent, dull man who could only be roused from torpor by athletic feats or discussions about prize fights and baseball. After a few drinks, however, he could become very entertaining. He kept Mildred and Hal laughing all the way home.

As they were paying off the taxi, a man in evening dress strolled towards them. It was a hot June night, clear and still, and there was nothing remarkable, therefore, in the stranger's lack of an overcoat. To their surprise he turned out to be Bingy, who said that he happened to be passing on his way back from a party. It was the most transparent fib; his expression was tired and anxious; it was very evident he had stationed himself there to intercept them on their return. He admitted as much as they entered the sitting room and turned up the lights.

"A terrible thing has happened," he said. "I have had a quarrel with Felice!"

Seating himself in a chair, he looked the picture of dejection. His eyes shone feverishly behind his spectacles. Moistening his lips with the drink that Jimmy had hospitably poured out for him, he put it down and sighed heavily.

"Well, you were warned," said Mildred, not unkindly. "Oh, Bingy, you should not have tried to see her in that frame of mind."

Bingy made a deprecatory gesture with his hand. No, he did not care for any crackers and cheese. In fact, he looked at Jimmy, who began hungrily to devour both, with a sort of aversion. Crackers and cheese, when your heart was breaking!

"You went and rowed her, of course," said Jimmy between munches. "What an idiotic thing to do, Bingy. She told you where you got off, and that is what you got for interfering. Bingy, you should listen to Mildred; people who are fortunate enough to know Mildred should

listen to her. Always listen to Mildred myself—and then you can blame her if things go wrong.”

“Do shut up, and let’s listen to what has happened,” interrupted Mildred. “You lay in wait for her after the shop closed, and then full of righteous indignation——”

“But posing—posing for artists!” moaned Bingy. “I didn’t mean to quarrel, I love the ground she walks on; in what seemed to me the tenderest, sweetest way I merely ventured to expostulate——”

“And she took it badly, of course?” It was Mildred who spoke.

“Flamed!” said Bingy. “Gave me no chance to explain, or anything. Said I had showed her what a hopelessly false position she was in, and that it only needed my—my meddling—to decide her.”

Leaning forward, he covered his face with his hands.

“You should have listened to Mildred,” said Jimmy, his mouth full of crackers and cheese. “Always listen to Mildred.”

Bingy pulled himself together and sat back again in his chair. He made a pretense of lighting a cigarette and took another sip of his whisky and soda.

“Nothing is irreparable with a child like that,” said Mildred, her deep, rich voice full of solicitude. “Don’t take it to heart, Bingy; I will straighten it out somehow.”

“You can’t,” said Bingy. “She is never coming back, and I was to give you a message of how grateful she was, and all that, for your kindness to her. She is never coming back. She is going to be an artist’s model. She said she was sick of us all. We shall never see her again.”

“Not coming back? You mean she is not coming back to the shop?” asked Mildred.

“No—and it is all my doing. Oh, God, what could have possessed me?”

“Well, it is a well-known feature in the course of true

love," remarked Jimmy. "True love thrives on things like that. Mildred and I had dozens of eternal farewells before bliss descended on us. Cheer up, old boy, it will all come right."

Nobody paid any attention to him, least of all Bingy, but undeterred, he growled out a few more encouragements and lit an immense cigar he had stolen at the party.

"We must find her," said Bingy. "By hook or by crook we must find her. We must save her."

Mildred's patience came to a sudden end.

"You have mismanaged it once, and now you want to mismanage it again. You want to hound the girl into hating all of us and drive her away entirely. I won't have it. I won't be associated in anything of the kind. If you want to be a lunatic, Bingy, go off and be a lunatic all by yourself. Count me out. I wash my hands of you."

Bingy, looking terribly crushed, mumbled apologies. Mildred was quite right; he would do what she said; his only excuse for coming that night was to implore her advice.

Mildred relented at such humility. It takes two to make even a discussion, and here was Bingy throwing himself on her mercy. She could not shoot at a flag of peace.

"You oughtn't to be here at all at this hour," she went on in a softened tone. "You ought to be in bed. Though it sounds inhospitable, Bingy, I think you had much better go home." Bingy rose obediently, and there was a glint of gratitude in his eyes when Hal said he would accompany him.

"You're taking all this too seriously," said Mildred, clasping his outstretched hand in both her own and regarding him affectionately. "In fact, I believe we have all taken it too seriously. Older people are always apt to become tyrants, and the younger generation has always been

rebellious. I will try somehow to get Felice back to the shop, but of course, Bingy, it must be on the understanding you will do nothing of this kind again."

"I won't," said Bingy in a broken voice. "But what is the good of talking when she is gone? I know we shall never see her again. She said she was sick of us all and was going to become an artist's model."

The way he quavered was pitiful.

"Anne will know where she is," said Mildred comfortingly. "I shall get back our little lost sheep all right; go home, and don't worry any more about it."

Bingy, seeming to acquiesce, made his farewells. But outside on the street as Hal and he took their way uptown—both deciding that a walk would do them good—he revealed more fully the agony of his misgivings.

"Anne and Felice are absolutely alienated, Hal. Anne has virtually cast her off, won't give her any money at all, and speaks of her with a terrible bitterness. She says if Felice is determined to become a little New York tart she won't have anything more to do with her. Those were her very words when I went to tell her that I had arranged matters with Boyd Lancashire and could guarantee her a provisional income of forty thousand dollars a year. I thought she would be so pleased that she might give up a little bit of it for Felice. But she wouldn't hear of it—not one single cent. And imagine my feelings after taking all that trouble and forcing it up from the twenty-five thousand that Lancashire had said was the directors' limit! I was working for Felice, you know; it was to get her a decent allowance from her mother. And there was worse than that—for me, I mean."

"How do you mean—there was worse for you?"

"Remember the whole idea of my marrying Felice came from Anne. I am the least presumptuous man in the world;

such a thing was beyond my wildest dreams; it was she who gingered me up to it—who encouraged and supported me. She even spoke of a considerable dowry, though that meant very little to me. I am well enough off to take care of a wife without anybody's help. In fact, when this thing got noised about the office it was more than hinted that they would give me a raise of another ten thousand. I am a very solid man there, Hal; there is not a young banker in New York who has the prospect of a rosier future. But I didn't want any dowry; I wanted Felice."

"Has Anne cooled off about it, then?"

"Cooled off! I might have been the dirt under her feet. She said she could have tolerated an American son-in-law while she was Tim's wife, but now that Tim is dead—she seems to think that quite definite—she said she wanted her daughter to marry someone of her own social position in England. It was frightfully wounding. Apparently now that Tim was gone she had no more use for me at all; said that all Americans were horrible, and that she had only put up with Tim because he was Irish. And all this, if you please, after I had been working like a horse to raise her allowance."

"Then you don't think that Felice will tell Anne where she has gone to?"

"I am positive she won't. All that talk about becoming a tart cut Felice to the quick. I can't see them ever becoming friends again—even ostensibly. Besides, Anne is sailing for Europe in a fortnight or so. She was only waiting till I could settle about her allowance."

They walked along in silence, both pondering. It all seemed very insurmountable to Hal. Having no comments to make, he did not make them. The silence lasted for blocks. They were on Fifth Avenue now, and Hal felt guilty at enjoying the walk so much. It was so pleasantly empty at that late hour, and the night was so luminous

and velvety. At last he murmured something about it all coming right. He had to do something to soothe the unfortunate man beside him. Such insincerities were like the bromides doctors gave to distraught patients. Bingy responded to the treatment, swallowed his bromide and felt better; admitted that perhaps he was taking it altogether too hard.

"I can't tell you what Mildred and you have meant to me in all this," he said. "I shall never forget it—never, Hal, never. . . ."

After more blocks of silence, he said, changing the subject: "I am having a lot of trouble with Friedlander about Tim's insurance. It is very big, you know—seven hundred and fifty thousand dollars on his life. Friedlander is moving heaven and earth to get Lancashire and me to cancel it. But we haven't any authority to cancel it, and it might get us into a horrible mess if we did."

"Certainly it is no time to cancel a policy when the beneficiary is probably dead," said Hal. "Though I can't see why you should have any trouble; it is none of your business."

"It is the way he goes on about it, the insulting way he goes on about it—and his insinuations. It disturbs me, too, that he should be so positive that Tim is dead. He seems to have no doubt whatever that Tim is dead."

"But that is only a conjecture. Why should Friedlander's conjecture be worth more than anybody else's?"

"Quite so, quite so! I suppose it is really because he is such an offensive type of man. It jars me even to hear Friedlander's voice over the 'phone. The point of all his yapping is that he suspects Tim has committed suicide and that later on they may have to pay Anne the money."

"But of course they will have to pay it."

"No, Hal, you don't understand. Tim only took out this insurance about ten months ago, he has only paid one

premium, and there is a clause in it that if he should commit suicide within one year and one month, the policy becomes void. Friedlander as good as said that Tim might have intended to commit suicide all the time—only so cleverly that his body should never be recovered; or recovered so long afterwards that it would be impossible to decide how he did die. Of course, I have a certain sympathy for him—as one business man for another—because it is terrible to have such a liability hanging over you and not knowing whether you will have to meet it or not. It is not a big company, you know; it is not one of the giants. Anyhow, that is the situation on the surface. Below, there is an insinuation so terrible that I hardly dare mention it even to you.”

Hal, intensely interested, waited in silence. Nothing helps half-made revelations more than silence. What on earth could Bingy be implying?

When the banker at last spoke it was in a lowered voice; he passed his arm through Hal's, drawing him close beside him.

“Tim took out this policy some time after he had married Anne, and Anne is specifically named in it as the one the money is to go to if Tim died. Now, under the law of the state the company is incorporated in—Delaware, I think—Anne could not benefit if she—if she . . .”

He hesitated. Hal continued the interrupted sentence.

“If a wife murdered her husband for the insurance money on his life, the law would not let her have it?”

“Yes, that is it exactly. That is what makes it so terrible for me to have anything to do with Friedlander—his hints, his suspicions. And I will tell you something I would not say to a single soul except you, Hal. It was Anne who made him take out this policy and name her as the sole beneficiary. She told me so herself. Said she had seen too many millionaires die and leave nothing.”

"I see what you mean now," said Hal. "I can see how vile it is for you, Bingy."

"And that is why Friedlander is in such a fever to cancel the policy at its surrender value. He comes back and back with offers of bonuses—ten per cent., twenty per cent.—and tries to whipsaw me and Boyd Lancashire by lying about what the other has said—agreeing, you know. Not that in any case we should have any authority to make a settlement on those lines, except perhaps an implied authority. Our position—Boyd Lancashire's and mine—is extremely uncomfortable. And to make things harder for us both Judge Vandenhoff won't give us the slightest hint of who are named trustees in Tim's will. I think that is carrying professional ethics to the verge of imbecility; and to make matters almost hopeless, Lancashire, in revenge, has threatened to drop him as general counsel for the Zuni and Utah Consolidated."

"Do you know what I think of it all, Bingy?"

"Please tell me. I have never needed help so much in my life."

"You are too considerate, too conscientious. Why not keep within the letter of the law, within your legal responsibilities, and let it go at that? What is Anne to you, anyhow? Why bother with Friedlander's surmises and innuendoes? Why not stick to the one important thing for you—your courtship of Felice? I would let everything go except that."

Bingy groaned.

"To tell me that after she has disappeared! Is that what you call help?"

"You make too much of a few angry words at a street corner. Bingy, I thought bankers had more sense. It would not surprise me at all if you found Felice arriving demurely tomorrow at Mildred's shop as usual. Why take a young girl's impulsive statement so seriously? That artist's model

idea might have been just to make you squirm. Women have a diabolical knack of knifing a man where it will hurt most."

Bingy sighed so deeply that it was almost a moan.

"I would give every cent I have in the world and half my life thrown in, if I could see her walk into Mildred's shop tomorrow."

"You will probably see it for a great deal less. I can't believe Felice will cut herself from everybody like that. It is my conviction she will be down there tomorrow as usual."

"Well, I know one person who will certainly be there," said Bingy, with a sudden access of relief in his voice. "I am inclined to agree that perhaps I did take her too seriously. She is far too fastidious to drop suddenly into such depths of—of horror. Shut in with an artist, defenseless, perhaps unclothed . . . Thank God, you walked back with me, Hal. I feel I shall be able to sleep."

"And she is not only fastidious, she has another quality that will protect her even more," said Hal. "Felice is the most sensitive creature I think I ever knew in my life; she quivers visibly at any strange contacts; I do not doubt but that it was perfectly true Mildred's mob of friends wore on her beyond endurance. Mildred, with all her understanding, cannot put herself in the place of a girl like Felice."

"None of us can," exclaimed Bingy. "We must all seem so coarse and common to a spirit so—so ethereal. I will tell her that; I will go down on my knees and tell her that."

Hal could not help smiling to himself at the picture of Bingy on his knees on Thirty-ninth Street at nine o'clock in the morning. However, he kept this gleam of entertainment to himself. It was a comfort that Bingy's spirits had been so much restored, and that he had been put in a

much more suitable frame of mind to continue his interrupted courtship with success.

They parted at Forty-third Street.

"I hope to God she will turn up tomorrow," were Bingy's last words. "If she does not turn up tomorrow, I shall be absolutely desperate."

Chapter XVI

THE next morning toward noon Hal had a visit from Nigma. She scarcely missed a day now, arriving with a regularity that both pleased and disturbed him, though he suspected it was all due to her interest in the Reardons and to his intimacy with the principal figures concerned. She was insatiably curious about everything concerning the mystery of Tim's disappearance. It was inevitable, therefore, that she had no sooner tossed her little hat aside than Hal should be telling her about his talk with Bingy overnight. He was glad to do so; the Reardon case seemed to bring them far closer together than lessons in literature.

"Then it is all over now—Felice has either come back or she hasn't," Nigma said, when she had heard Hal to the end.

"Yes, it is all over now."

She mused.

"I am getting so fond of poor Bingy," she remarked. "It is funny how one can get to like a person one has never seen, isn't it? I suppose it is because it is all so hopeless for him. It is the kind of sympathy one would have for Jack of the Beanstalk—watching him teetering in the air and so likely to fall off."

"I am afraid poor Bingy has fallen off already," said Hal. "Though of course Felice might come back—one cannot tell."

"It is unbearable not to know," exclaimed Nigma, jumping up from the chair in which she had seated herself.

"I feel like going right down there and finding out for myself. Would you mind? Would you think it idiotically impulsive?"

"Not if you came back and told me all about it," said Hal. "You can't be in any greater suspense than I am in; it has been fretting me all the morning."

"Then I'll go," cried Nigma, darting for her hat.

As she was putting it on, she remarked: "Do you know, it is my conviction Felice Hamilton is more involved in this than anyone thinks. I don't believe her quarrel with Bingy had anything to do with her leaving—except as an excuse. I think that Mildred and the shop and all that was a subterfuge to escape from her mother, and that she had no intention of really staying on with Mildred."

Hal stared at her in amazement.

"That is certainly a new idea," he said. "Though I think it very far-fetched, Nigma. Felice is so transparently what she is."

"Or isn't," remarked Nigma significantly. "Well, I am off, Hal. Shut the windows tight and keep the smoke all in till I get back, please."

Laughing, they both moved to the door which Hal opened to let her pass out. The corridor as usual was very dark—especially to the eyes that had just left the sunshine of the room. As Hal was about to close the door he heard Nigma cry out in alarm, and an instant later she was beside him again in a shiver of fear.

"There are two men lurking there," she said in a low voice. "There, at the top of the stairs!"

Hal peered into the obscurity. Yes, she was right. He could faintly discern two figures.

"What are you doing there—what do you want?" he called out roughly. As he did so, he pulled the little chain that actuated the gas jet. It shot into flame, revealing the faces of two men advancing towards him. The first face

was that of Carl Pipf, and the second that of a tall, shambling young man. Both looked extremely apologetic.

"Sure, I am sorry if we have startled the young lady," said Carl Pipf, taking his hat off.

"But what were you doing there—camped there on the stairs like that?" demanded Hal, much incensed.

"It was like this, Mr. Curwen, sir," said Carl Pipf in an effort to make his voice sound disarming. The result was a hoarse whisper, vibrating like an order to scuttle the ship or open fire with the starboard gun. "It was like this, Mr. Curwen, sir, we come in, me and my nephew, right on the heels of the young lady, and not wishing to be in the way, or intrude, we decided to wait till she had left."

"I still don't see what you want," said Hal, somewhat mollified. "Why on earth have you come here at all?"

"To see you about something every confidential, Mr. Curwen, sir. I feel you ought to be told it—and told it at once."

Nigma rustled away, her shadowy form could be seen hurriedly descending the stairs.

"Come in," said Hal. As soon as the door was shut, he added: "What is all this about, Carl?"

As he spoke he looked sharply at the shambling young man. He was about thirty, a pale, sickly-looking fellow. His shabby clothes hung on him like a skeleton.

"My nephew, Teddy," said Carl Pipf by way of an introduction. "He was shot in the throat in the war, and can't do anything much except draw his pension. He lives with my brother at the Athelstane apartment house in Central Park West, where my brother is the janitor."

"Sit down," said Hal. They were probably looking for a job for Teddy. Though what kind of a job could such a poor, shrunken, injured wreck of a man be capable of filling? However, it was one's duty to help such poor devils if one could.

"Nothing goes on at Idle Wyld that I don't see it," said Carl, in a low voice. "I make it my business to see it; night or day, Mr. Curwen, sir, I never think of nothing but Tim and whose hand it was that took him off. And as my men are still all there, I have organized it systematic. And the result of it is, Mr. Curwen, sir, I have some very queer things to report to you."

"Go ahead," said Hal.

"Mrs. Reardon has been making occasional visits to New York. She goes in her car to Makomshook; then takes the train to New York; then——"

Carl stopped. He looked about the room.

"You are alone here, ain't it? Nobody behind those curtains to listen, or anything?"

Hal reassured him. There was nobody in the apartment save themselves. In the ensuing pause Teddy had a fit of coughing. Then his fair, weak face resumed its expression of hopelessness and depression. Carl was free to go on.

"She slipped through my hands the first time," he said. "My man took the train all right, but he lost her at New York. But thinking that if it happened once it was likely to happen again, I organized better for the next time. I thought of my brother at the Athelstane, and this boy here, loafing around, doing nothing but cough and smoke too many coffin-nails. So I arranged with my brother—Nick's his name—to put Teddy here on my pay roll at two a day. Described Mrs. Reardon and showed him all the newspaper pictures of her. Do you get it?"

Hal, greatly interested, said he got it.

"The next time she left," went on Carl, "I tipped off Teddy by telephone, and had him waiting for her at the Pennsylvania Station."

Then turning to Teddy he told him to "take it up from there."

Teddy did so.

"I picked her up all right," he said, in an accent no type can represent. "Followed her to the Jersey tube and kept with her till she got off at Dyart. Then she took a street car, me still following, and got off in a pretty bum quarter. Street hawkers and Italian women in rocking chairs nursing babies, and cabbage stalks in the gutters—that kind of a quarter. But she went right on, neither looking to the right or the left, like she knew where she was going. Then Chinese signs begin to show up on the houses—chop-suey houses, laundries, and all that, like Chinatown here, only worse. I was keeping hot after her when she turned into an open doorway—Gee, it was that dark and scary-looking I shouldn't have felt much like trying it myself—between a laundry, and a place with glazed windows and a row of dead cats hanging out in front. I didn't follow her in, not that I was scared or anything, but it was that narrow and dark I didn't want her to bump into me coming out. Instead, I just stood around and waited, making a note of it all like Uncle Carl said he wanted me to do. It was named Stinson Street, and the shop with the dead cats had only Chinese names on it, and the number forty-three. The laundry was named the Ong Fat Elite Laundry and had in white letters: 'Quick orders a specialty, monthly arrangements for office towels.'"

He stopped. His voice had grown huskier and huskier till it had sunk to a sort of raucous whisper.

"It gets me when I talk too much," he said apologetically, gulping and swallowing, and indicating his throat.

"Well, she come out?" prompted Carl, not unkindly.

After more gulping and swallowing, Teddy said she had.

"Yes, she come out, and went back just as methodical to New York where I saw her off in the train—telephoning to Uncle Carl here the hour and that."

"There is no sense in making Teddy say it all over again," remarked Carl Pipf. "But exactly the same thing

happened three times afterwards, and in exactly the same way."

"Except that I went in the last time," put in Teddy. "I followed her in as far as I dared go, but when it turned and turned, and got blacker than Tophet, with her still ahead and getting out a little electric torch—I got cold feet and quit."

"That's the report, Mr. Curwen, sir," said Carl, with a strange emotion in his voice. "Four visits like that to the worst part of Dyart. I don't know what you think, but it looks pretty fierce to me. It's blackmail she is paying there, and you know for why. Dead men tell no tales, but live ones need their mouths shut with money."

At Hal's warning look towards Teddy, he said quickly: "Teddy is all right; I wouldn't have put him on the job otherwise."

Hal, in silence, took a piece of paper and wrote down Stinson Street, Dyart, N. J.; then the number 43; then Ong Fat's Elite Laundry. He wrote slowly; he was thinking hard all the while.

"Carl," he said at last, "I have more than a mind to go there myself. I should like to see the place. This is one of the queerest things in the whole queer business."

"What about shadowing her yourself the next time she makes one of them visits?" said Carl. "There would be plenty of time after I had 'phoned Teddy. He could come right around and get you."

A tremor of revulsion passed through Hal at the proposal. Spying on Anne Reardon in company with this shambling derelict was something he could not stoop to. However, he did not express this thought aloud. He could not wound the uncouth, troubled man before him whose devotion to Tim reminded him of a faithful old dog's. A surly old dog, with yellow fangs, who would have not a moment's rest till he found his master.

"No, I won't do that," he said. "Teddy can do it much

better alone, since she might recognize me if I were with him. Only he might report to me if he learns anything new."

"Hear that, Teddy?" said Carl, with an air of passing the word from the bridge.

"Yep," answered Teddy. "But what if I come and he ain't here?"

"Hang around till he does," commanded Carl. "You might as well be here as smoking coffin-nails in your fader's basement."

The prospect of Teddy Pipf permanently installed in the corridor outside did not specially appeal to Hal. But it was no time to make objections, nor to discourage faithful old dogs. Instead, he commended them both, shook hands, and dismissed them.

They had hardly more than gone when Nigma returned. She looked excited and oddly happy, as though she had enjoyed her experience. Panting a little from the stairs, and as buoyant and fresh as though from some agreeable exercise, she exhaled vitality and youth.

"She never came," she exclaimed in answer to Hal's unspoken inquiry. "Not seeing her from the outside, I nerved myself to go in and talk to Mildred Hare myself. After all, she had seen me here before and it wasn't as though I were a perfect stranger. And what a dear she is! I don't wonder you like her so much."

"But what did she say?" Hal, in suspense, eagerly put the question.

"Nothing, except that—that Felice had never shown up—and how dreadfully poor Bingy had taken it. All her talk was about Bingy and the frightful state he was in. She had to persuade him not to hire detectives. She said he went on like a madman."

"Poor Bingy," said Hal. "There is nothing more cruel in life than being obliterated under a rock you have pulled down on yourself."

"Yes, that is true," assented Nigma a little vaguely. "What did Carl Pipf want?"

Hal told her the whole story, while she listened intently. At first smiling, she grew serious, then almost breathless.

"I am going to Dyart myself after lunch," said Hal. "I don't mean to take all this on the mere word of a cretin with a tube in his throat. He may have invented it all by way of earning his five dollars a day. I am going over there to do a little confirming of his tale."

Nigma had a very expressive face. If one knew her at all one could see the swift flash of her thoughts reflected in it. She was evidently eager to come with him, and yet was withheld. Passionately eager to come, and yet somehow frightened—deterred. The conflict of purpose lasted but an instant or two, but Hal got a curious sense of it.

"I wish you would take me with you," she said, after that moment's pause. "Perhaps I might be like the mouse that helped the lion! Please, Hal, do let me come with you."

To Hal this was the culmination of his crafty design. In fact the unusual initiative he had shown had been largely inspired by the thought she would wish to come with him. They would have luncheon together; some of the barriers between them would go down; more would topple on that weird quest in the heart of Dyart's Chinatown. Then after that what might not happen? Alluring visions filled the background of his dream. But like a master of guile he pretended to be surprised.

"What a wonderful proposal!" he exclaimed. "To think of you suggesting such a thing! If the Beautiful Persian goes as far as that, where will she stop?"

"But may I, Hal?"

"Come to my arms that I may whisper my consent," exclaimed Hal.

But the Beautiful Persian did not come. Nor would she

come to luncheon either. In a very matter-of-fact way she stated she would be waiting for him at the newsstand in the great hall of the Pennsylvania Station at 2:30. Then she departed, in her quiet, reliant way, refusing to allow him to descend with her.

Stinson Street, when at last they found it, looked squalid and deserted. Hal suspected, from the rows of electric bulbs he saw in some of the gaudily decorated Chinese restaurants, that it dozed through the day to come awake at night. The few Chinamen they saw seemed busy enough within the dark recesses of their shops, and the few on the street walked along as though with a definite purpose. There were no idlers nor loiterers to stare at them. Like most Oriental quarters in big American cities, it had eaten like a cancer into a quarter once fashionable and exclusive. Crinolined ladies had once emerged from those houses now given over to decay; fine gentlemen with gold buttons; stately dowagers and little girls in pantalettes. A teeming, alien life had taken their place—noisome and exotic. But it was picturesque in its tumbledown way, giving a suggestion of evil and mystery, and stirring the imagination with what must lie beyond one's sight in its dark, foul depths.

They had no trouble in finding the doorway Teddy had described. Sure enough, there it was between the Elite Laundry and the place with the dead cats. But there were only two cats now, and beside them, hanging on the hooks, were some lumps of unknown meat and several festoons of repulsive-looking eatables.

Relaxing their pace they walked slowly past the gloomy fissure separating the two shops. They did not stop, for fear of attracting attention, but they examined it searchingly in passing. It was dark and sinister, and ended in impenetrable darkness. A few crimson posters, printed in hieroglyphics and old and weather-worn, were pasted

on the walls near where the door should have been. It and its hinges had long ago been torn away, but the scars remained. Walking to the end of the street which was a fairly short one, they crossed to the other side and returned in order to keep the place under view. But no one entered it nor came out.

"Let's go in and buy a dead cat and ask some questions," said Hal. "And—or—as they say in legal documents—what's the matter with dropping in at the Elite Laundry to ask if they will call for my washing?"

Nigma demurred. It would be a mistake to do either. Why rouse attention when they were receiving none? Oughtn't they instead to enter the horrible hole and see if they couldn't find something at the end of it. Knock at doors if they heard people inside and ask if Sam Yup were there.

"You mean my imaginary cook, of course?" said Hal. "Gave this as his address before he got sick and left? Splendid idea, Nigma! We'll do it!"

"I don't believe there could be any danger," said Nigma, though she was just a little disturbed. They were so infinitely remote, and the profound silence in itself was disquieting.

"It would be stupid to turn back now," said Hal. "Besides, I have always been told they are very decent, and only murder one another; and that it is almost an understood thing that as long as they don't bother us, we won't bother them. It's an excellent principle, which might be followed elsewhere for that matter. Let us turn at the end, cross the street and take it in on our way back."

"Did you bring your electric torch?" asked Nigma. Yes, Hal had brought it. They had decided in the apartment that it would be needed.

They stopped again in front of the doorway, which on close inspection looked even more forbidding than before.

"I tell you what," said Hal, stopping undecidedly on the threshold. "You stay here, and if I yell out or anything, blow this police whistle. I brought it along on general principles. But whatever you do, stay outside on the sidewalk."

Nigma agreed. She took the whistle, and looking at it a little doubtfully, asked Hal if he thought it were clean. He burst out laughing at her question. How like Nigma!

"Yes, I washed it carefully nine years ago when I first acquired it during a burglar scare, and of course have soaked it in boiling water every night since."

Nigma, looking hurt, extricated a bit of wadding from the mouthpiece and shook out some tobacco dust. She was always thorough, and if she had need to blow a police whistle she wanted to be sure it would blow.

With a last, quick look about Hal started on the search for Sam Yup. He had not gone far before he required his electric torch, for the passageway became a veritable tunnel in which—had he not had a light—he would have been forced to grope with his hands. There was not a sound to be heard though he stopped twice to listen. It was uncannily silent and was now the more ghostly since the entrance itself was no longer visible. The tunnel had swerved without his being aware of it and he was alone in the all-pervading darkness. Slowly advancing, he detected what seemed to be a plank door on his left, a door without knob or lock, that when pressed with all his weight refused to budge.

He rapped on it, the sound reverberating mournfully; rapped again loudly, more insistently—kicked—still there was nothing but that desolate echo. Going on he came to a hole in the floor that looked like a well, or a pitfall intentionally placed there. Inspection showed it was neither, but the opening for a steep and dilapidated wooden stairway leading down to a subterranean passage. Hal de-

scended the ladder, flashing his light about and unpleasantly affected by the dank close air. A rat squeaked and fled, nearly causing him to fall off. The floor, when at last he gingerly set his feet on it, was of boards that seemed to be merely laid over the earth or mud beneath. The walls dripped with moisture and there was a penetrating smell of damp and decay. Proceeding a few steps he examined the walls carefully for any indications of a concealed door—which he suspected must be close at hand. Secret doors were a part of those Chinese labyrinths; part of that ratlike life of which the defense was to vanish.

At this moment he heard a sound of voices, muffled and blurred, but almost at his ear. He listened intently, scarcely breathing. The murmur grew louder; a voice suddenly shrilled hysterically; then there was a confused outcry and a chair or table went over with a crash, followed by a terrific detonation as deafening as a thunder-clap. The wall suddenly seemed to open beside him, and a man, pistol in hand, backed out amid a wild outcry of snarls and execrations. It all happened with the speed of a conjuring trick; Hal instinctively flattened himself to the other wall, and the startled, panting, escaping man, detecting a new enemy, turned towards him tigerishly. Hal flashed his light on him, screaming: "Don't point that at me, you fool!" But as he did so, he was astounded to recognize that convulsed and desperate face. It was Tats! Tats, shrinking back and then brushing past him in headlong flight.

Resisting his impulse to pursue him, for a second's reflection showed him the futility of such a thing, Hal edged cautiously toward the still open door from which a glimmer of light emerged. The noise inside ceased. The door, which opened inward, seemed to shut of itself. A bolt grated. The wall, under the dazzling circle of his torch, showed not a crack. It might have been a dream.

It seemed a poor moment to knock in order to ask about Sam Yup. But from a kind of bravado Hal did so in order to tell Nigma later that he had carried out the program to the letter. But the knocks, falling on cement, made scarcely a sound. Though had they reverberated like a klaxon they would have had no effect on that fortress, now hermetically sealed. Hal backed away and continued to back until his heels warned him of the wooden stairway behind him. Then, flashing his torch about to reveal any lurking enemy, he rushed up the stair and fled as fast as he could go.

He was thankful to see Nigma where he had left her on the sidewalk. It was almost irritating to see how cool and undisturbed she looked. She welcomed him smilingly.

"Didn't a man pass you just now?" Hal asked. Now that the experience was over he was agitated and frightened for the first time. It was hard to master his voice, to affect the unconcern of his companion, whose tranquil eyes were looking so sweetly into his.

"Yes, a man sauntered out, smoking a cigarette," she said. "A little fellow, very sprucely dressed in American clothes, and who looked like a Japanese."

"But what did he do? Where did he go?"

It was Nigma's turn to look surprised.

"Oh, he walked slowly past me, humming a coon song about his Alabama Baby, and then strolled away up the street."

"Do you know who it was, Nigma?"

Her surprise turned to astonishment.

"No."

"It was Tats, the butler at Idle Wyld, and I believe he has just killed somebody in there."

Chapter XVII

THE worst of a secret is how to dispose of it. Hal and Nigma were at a loss what to do about Tats. They debated the matter as they made their way back to the station. What were they to do—or rather, what was Hal to do? It seemed unwise to tell Carl Pipf. His brooding mind was too intent already on inculpating Anne. Such a revengeful, ignorant, unrestrained man, dominated by a fixed idea, was capable of doing terrible things. No, nothing of this should be told to Carl Pipf. Or at least not yet, unless Carl himself made some new discoveries in the meanwhile. But the others should be told at once—Bingy and the Hares.

All the way back to New York they racked their heads about Anne and Tats; their connection with each other, and the purpose of their strange visits to Dyart's Chinatown. That there was such a connection seemed inescapable. Had not Carl Pipf's nephew traced Anne four times almost to the door of that den from which Tats had burst out? Why had she been going there, and with such stealth? And what had Tats to do with it—or her? And what could have been the desperation forcing him to shoot? Shooting to kill—for the cry, the struggle and the shot must have been the swift crescendo of a murder.

Suddenly Hal had a terrible thought. Could Anne have possibly been with Tats? Had Tats been defending her? Had the door, closing in the wall, cut off her last hope of escape? Communicating this to Nigma they both grew frightfully disturbed. Hal indeed could hardly wait for the

train to stop at the Pennsylvania Station before he was rushing to telephone to Carl. He got him easily. Carl's voice shook the receiver as he demanded gruffly: "Who's that? What do you want?"

Hal tried not to betray his agitation.

"Is that you, Carl? It is Mr. Curwen speaking."

"Oh, Mr. Curwen! Yes, it's me, Mr. Curwen."

"Is everything all right at Idle Wyld?"

"Oh, yes—yoost as usual."

"Nothing specially new then?"

"No, she is staying home regular now. Been playing golf with one of the caddies."

"Today? This afternoon, I mean?"

"Sure; only left half an hour ago."

"All the staff there as usual?"

"No, Tats is off to the city for the day; I have all the rest ticked off."

"Well, report anything new, won't you?"

"Sure."

"Good-bye then."

"Good-bye, sir."

Hal parted from Nigma and hastened off to find Bingy if it were not too late. But Bingy never left the Traders' Trust before closing time and sometimes remained beyond. At the Traders' Trust, Bingy was not a person but a personage. He was guarded like the gold in their vaults, and intervening young women—and low fences—sifted and delayed the applicants to see him. After getting past the preliminary barriers, Hal was told immensely to his disgust that Mr. Stott was engaged. Nor could Hal see him later, it was too close to the hour they closed. At Hal's shocking proposal to intercept Bingy on his way out, the girl explained that Bingy had his own private exit. But he could leave his card and come on the morrow.

Hal was about to turn away in despair when he saw Mildred's card on the girl's desk.

"Is that the person Mr. Stott is now seeing?"

It was.

Hal took out his own card, saying that it had to be taken to Mr. Stott at once.

"I don't ask him to see me, or anything," he said. "But you must show him that card."

His insistence prevailed. She was a paragon but human. Besides, Hal threatened if she refused to leap the low fence and make his own way to Mr. Stott's door.

Rather than risk such a scandal and go the length of touching the alarm on her desk, the girl, with extreme unwillingness, consented to take in the card. When she reappeared it was with Bingy's private secretary, whom Hal knew. Everything had changed magically. He had become the most welcome of visitors, and all barriers, varnished or human, simply faded away.

Bingy was seated at his desk with Mildred beside him, and they both greeted him warmly. He was just the person they wanted to see; Mildred had found a delightful little place at Point Placid which would be ideal for the summer. It had boats and bathing and everything, and——

Hal brushed the delightful little place aside as though it were a fly.

"I have just had a most astounding experience," he said. "I don't know what to make of it. I was within an ace of seeing Tats shoot a man in Dyart."

Mildred, who had been smiling, turned pale. A look, almost of stupefaction, passed over Bingy's face.

"Tats!" they exclaimed almost in the same breath.

Hal hurriedly told his story; what did they make of it?

They could make nothing of it, of course. The more they discussed it, the more hopelessly befogged they seemed to be. What was the connection between Anne and Tats?

She had brought him from Paris, put him in control of her whole household, and was even taking him back to Paris with her. Yes, Bingy knew that definitely; he had taken the tickets himself on the *Mauretania*—for Tats and her Japanese chef. There was the same grim thought in all their minds. Perhaps Tim had never left the house; had vanished inside it.

“What will you do if the police get after him?” asked Bingy of Hal.

“You mean——?”

“Yes, if they find a dead Chinaman.”

“They never find dead Chinamen,” said Hal. “It is a world by itself; we merely touch the edges of it.”

“Tats may have shot at the ceiling for all we know,” said Mildred. “We must keep out of all this.”

Bingy reflected.

“I don’t see what to do—except do nothing,” he said at last.

“Perhaps we ought to tax her with it,” remarked Hal. “Put it right up to her—to Anne.”

“She is too clever,” said Mildred. “You needn’t think I haven’t tried my best in lots of ways already to pierce the veil. Anne may be a very ambiguous person, but she is very adroit in defending herself and putting you in the wrong.”

“Let her go in peace,” said Bingy. “After all, she is Felice’s mother; we must never forget she is Felice’s mother.”

Hal smiled to himself, though he was willing enough to leave the matter as it was. There is no worse fate in New York than to become a “material witness” in a murder case.

The talk continued for a long while, and it only confirmed their decision to do nothing. Bingy’s last words, as

Hal and Mildred left together, were a repetition of his absurd phrase: "We must always think of Felice."

For Hal the next few days were largely concerned in renting the little house Mildred had found for him at Point Placid. New York had become terribly hot; it was almost July; in the preoccupation of his work he had given no thought of escaping until Mildred had taken the matter on her own shoulders. Hal was too oppressed by the heat to argue about it; it seemed sufficient that she was pleased and said that Point Placid was delightful. The cottage belonged to an artist friend of hers, and was a tiny place on the edge of a landlocked bay. It had its own little pier from which you could swim, or fish for crabs; it had a power boat that only needed a hundred dollars spent on it to make it go; it had a canoe, but no paddles. It was destitute of towels, sheets, and any but the most elementary of kitchen utensils. But Mildred, undeterred, was convinced it was delightful. Her artist friend, besides, needed the money.

Personally, Hal was squeamish about swimming in such dubious water, and he loathed catching crabs. Nor did he like New Jersey, nor the mosquitoes, nor having to pump his own bath. But Mildred said it was exactly the place he wanted, and so he took it, on the assurance that she and Jimmy would virtually share it with him. What with Jimmy's work and Mildred's shop, they were very much tied to New York and the little cottage was a solution for their own dog days.

In the arranging of all this, and in the confusion of moving, Hal had little time to think of anything else; though incidentally he learned that Anne had sailed, taking Tats and Unida, her Japanese chef, with her. There was no news whatever of Felice; she had entirely dropped out

of sight. Bingy, desolate and forlorn, had attached himself to Mildred, and scarcely let a day go past without seeing her. Jimmy considered this a decided infliction, but Mildred, who had a maternal heart, found it touching. She loved people who clung to her and guided their lives by what she told them. It was thus evident that Bingy would spend much of his time, too, at Point Placid; Mildred even talked of taking an adjoining cottage for him, and he had pathetically pointed out how useful his big car might be to them all. Mildred was unable to resist such appeals, and Jimmy said the only comfort of it was that, unlike most of her protégés, they would not have to find a job for Bingy afterwards.

Hal would have taken an affecting farewell of Nigma had she let him. He really liked her, and at that moment it seemed unbearable that she might flit out of his life forever. But as usual she kept herself delicately aloof from sentiment, refusing to invest their parting with either tenderness or repining. She said cheerfully that she might come and see him at Point Placid, and had the directions carefully explained to her. But Hal doubted whether there was the least sincerity in this, and ascribed it to a desire to lessen a constraint that perhaps she shared. He made one last effort to learn her name, but she merely smiled, and said she would let him know when she got one. Yet with the mockery in her eyes there was a glint of something else. She gazed at him, at the little room, at the desk where they were used to sit side by side, as though to hold them all in her recollection. Then with the merest handclasp she was gone, and he heard her light tread on his stair for the last time.

Jimmy and Mildred had been slow in joining him at Point Placid. Sometimes Hal wondered if they ever meant to come at all. Once they paid a flying visit with Bingy in his car, but it was all rather hectic and unsatisfactory.

They had brought a Russian pianist with them, and it was impossible to speak with any freedom. The pianist was Mildred's new love; she had discovered him running a freight elevator, and was proportionately elated. Felice's name never came up at all except in a whisper from Mildred that Anne had taken her disappearance with an icy equanimity.

"She gave me this," said Mildred, showing Hal a superb emerald ring on her hand. "And she said to send Felice on to her as soon as she had learned her lesson—cried when she kissed me good-bye, and said I was the only person she had ever liked in America."

Bingy might have been Hal's oldest and dearest friend. Under his dry exterior the banker concealed a warm and very naïve heart. He looked worn, had the air of a man trying to adjust himself to a terrible bereavement; in repose his face took an almost tragic expression, and he seemed unaware of how often he sighed. In his craving for sympathy he kept proffering gifts. Hal refused any for himself, but he suspected the source of the magnificent Coronas of which Jimmy seemed to have an unlimited supply. He gathered, too, that the Russian pianist had been outfitted by the same lavish hand. Bingy seemed abnormally conscious of being a dull man inflicting himself on their good nature. He was concerned about Hal having to pump his own bath, and volunteered to send a little engine and the necessary plumbers, making it plain he would bear all the expense himself. Hal refused, but he did find it disarming, and he exerted himself all the more to cheer up Bingy and try to make him feel at ease.

Two or three days afterward, as he returned from a walk with some household supplies, his old housekeeper told him that a lady was waiting to see him. Surprised, Hal asked where the lady was, and was told she was on the pier, fishing for crabs.

"I gave her two nice fish heads and told her how to do it," said Mrs. Miller. "She said she was a friend of yours, though she seemed to prefer crabbing to sitting inside and reading one of your books."

Leaving his packages Hal hurried down to the pier. At the end he saw a young woman in beige and blue stripes in the act of drawing up two crabs. More were squirming about her on the planks, evidently just caught.

Hal called out cheerfully. It was not until she turned that he recognized Nigma! Flushed, disheveled, and happy she danced about to keep her crabs from going overboard, and implored him to get a bucket. Hal got one from the boathouse, and in a transport of pleasure ran to greet her. But she had to have her crabs gathered up first. Eleven crabs—she counted them with gratification. Eleven crabs in twenty minutes! She almost kissed him in her exuberance, and dangling her line in the water again, insisted on continuing. It was not easy to get her away from the crabs to tell him about her coming. It was told between crabs and amidst cries of excitement.

"I don't know whether you will be cross with me or pleased," she said, looking at him oddly. "I wish I could begin with the end of the story first—that would justify me at least."

What could she mean?

"You will be so shocked," she went on. "I have been doing an awful thing."

"What kind of awful thing?"

"Almost the worst you could think of."

He eyed her sharply. But there was nothing in that smiling face to trouble him. That frank, free gaze, so innocent and arch, held no questionable secret.

"Well," she said at last, "if you were all willing to lose Felice, I wasn't."

"Wasn't? What do you mean?"

"It may have been an awful thing to do," she continued. "But anyhow, I did it. I found out where she was."

Hal could only stammer inarticulately. His thoughts were in a whirl. But gently and firmly he took the line away from her, and threw it, fish head and all, on the planks.

"I can't mix this up with crabs," he said. "What in God's name have you been doing, Nigma?"

"Dying of curiosity principally," she said. "Once you start a thing like that, you never want to stop."

"But you really found her?"

"Yes—and I felt I ought to come and see you about it immediately. Thank goodness, you were alone."

"But tell me—I am dying of impatience."

Nigma hesitated, evidently to get her story in the right sequence.

"First I went to the Hostel," she said. "But nobody there knew the slightest thing about her. Then it came back to me what Mildred had said to you—that Felice would allow herself to be escorted to the Hostel, and then slip away somewhere else. It seemed to me only reasonable that this other place could not be very far away."

She hesitated again.

"You mustn't think I started with any fixed determination," she added. "It was a perfect morning, and I had nothing else to do, and there was a kind of amusement in it. Originally I had intended nothing more than to ask about her at the Hostel. As I walked away from it I decided she must be somewhere within a radius of a few blocks, probably not more than seven or eight, if as many. With this in mind I roamed the neighborhood looking for every place where such a girl might be likely to find a lodging. No result, unknown everywhere. Then it occurred to me to ask a passing postman. Postmen must know so much about their own localities. But this one did not, nor a second. Then I had another great illumination——"

Hal interrupted her. It was fiercely hot on the pier, and the sun beat down on them without mercy. He insisted on their both seeking the shade of the boathouse. Here, held upright by some props, was the power boat that only needed a hundred dollars to make it go. It had a pleasant little cockpit into which they mounted and seated themselves after a preliminary tidying with Hal's handkerchief. It was exceedingly snug in the cockpit, and the wide doorway beyond offered a charming view of water and woods.

"Now, go on," said Hal. "Just as I was on the verge of sunstroke, you mentioned receiving a great illumination."

"I am afraid that was putting it rather strongly," resumed Nigma. "But I remembered her talk of wanting to be an artist's model, and apart from that it seemed to me that a girl alone and trying to earn her living would be likely to study the advertisements in the newspapers. Putting myself in her place it seemed to me she would be buying several newspapers a day. I roamed the district again with this new idea in mind, stopping at all the places, mostly little shops, where they sold newspapers and magazines. I was almost losing hope when I actually found a girl in a shop who said she knew her. She was a poor, grubby little thing of about fifteen, with a sweet sort of eagerness to help me. She recognized my description of Felice at once, and to my joy told me that Felice was living with a Miss Bestwith, who had a studio three or four doors away. Miss Bestwith was an animal painter, and quite a local celebrity. She made her living by painting cats and dogs, and once had thrilled the neighborhood by painting a performing bear on the street. But I did not wait to hear any more; I started off to find Miss Bestwith."

Hal uttered an exclamation of delight. It was thrilling.

"It was a slum of a place," continued Nigma. "If I hadn't been so keyed up it would have frightened me—dim, gas-lit corridors, and black recesses where people

might have pounced out at me. She was at the top and let me in herself. A tousled gray-haired woman, in a dirty old smock covered with paint. The studio was not a real studio at all, just one very long room improvised into three by some battered-looking screens. She was painting a muzzled Alsatian, who growled at me furiously, and she would have pushed me right out if I had not had the presence of mind to say I had a dog I wanted painted. Then she became altogether transformed and asked me to sit down on a box. It was hard to invent a dog at such short notice; it seemed safer to say it was a mongrel dog of no special breed. The point was what did she charge, and how long did it take? She showed me several different sizes ranging from fifteen dollars to fifty. I meekly said I thought the fifteen-dollar size would suit me. After talking about when I could bring my dog and all that, I delicately brought in the subject of Felice. If her present boarder were likely to move away soon, I might be very glad to take her place. I said it was hard for a working girl living alone with a dog in New York and that nothing would suit me better, if it were within my means, than to share such a delightful studio. I wonder the words did not choke me, but I said them.

"This unloosened everything; she was the kind that went from one extreme to the other. She was bottled up too, and dying to talk. To put it all briefly, she was accustomed to take in a boarder, and Felice was indeed staying with her, and under her own name. She was posing for an advertising agency and was absent most of the day. Miss Bestwith said she was a nice girl, very quiet and easy to get on with, but too pretty for her own good. She did not know how long she was going to stay, but several times she had said she might be leaving soon. Her only relatives seemed to be out West."

"Out West?" Hal repeated the words in surprise.

"Yes, out West. Then I asked what did she usually do in the evening—Felice, I mean. And Miss Bestwith answered that she usually went for a walk after their six o'clock supper, to get a little air. Miss Bestwith's tone made me realize this was a sore subject; Felice insisted on taking her walks alone, and had made it distressingly plain she did not wish to share them with the artist. After a lot about that I left, saying I would be back in a day or two with my dog."

Nigma paused.

"And was that all?"

"Oh, no, Hal! That was the beginning of everything; that is why I came here to-day."

Hal's previous thrill was nothing compared to his present sensation.

"Go on," he exclaimed. "This is too exciting for anything."

"I am coming to the place that is going to shock you," said Nigma.

She paused again and a faint blush mantled her cheeks.

"There is nothing more odious than spying on people; you don't realize how entirely odious it is until you do it. Well, I did do it, suspecting, as I told you before, that she was more involved in Tim Reardon's disappearance than any of you realized. Night after night I waited for her and followed her. She always started off in a different direction, but as soon as she had covered her tracks, she invariably made for the same place—the General Post Office on Thirty-third Street."

"The General Post Office!"

"Yes, and invariably to the same window—the general delivery window. There she asked, and always very timidly, if there were any letters for Miss Mary Dain. Once she spelled it out aloud, D-A-I-N. I followed her four times before she got any letter at all. Then last night one was

handed to her, which she did not open nor read till she was on the street outside. She walked along slowly in the direction of Broadway, reading it and rereading it as she went. Then she stopped and tore it in the tiniest pieces, which she threw away as she went along. Not all at once, but a few scraps at a time. But she was less careful with the envelope—merely tore it in half, crumpled both pieces up together, and threw them under a passing truck. I was close behind her, watching everything. I noted where the envelope had fallen and rushed for it as soon as she went on. And Hal, here it is!”

From her bag she took out two pieces of soiled paper and placed them side by side on Hal’s knee. It was the torn envelope

It was addressed in an emphatic hand, the writing big and intentionally legible.

Miss Mary Dain,
General Delivery,
General Post Office,
New York City, N. Y.

Hal examined it with great curiosity. It was a man’s writing, bold and firm.

“Look on the other side,” exclaimed Nigma impatiently. “Look at the postmark on the other side. That is the whole point of it.”

Hal did so. The postmark was that of Catalina Island, Calif.

“It must be from Tim Reardon,” said Nigma.

Chapter XVIII

It is strange how a few words can spoil a happy day. Instead of a cosy talk in the absurd boat, and wondering whether he could persuade Nigma to stay for luncheon, Hal suddenly found himself in the throes of painful and engrossing speculations. What a fatality there was about the Reardon mystery that it could never leave him long at peace. His share in it had been so slight, and yet it had already involved him in so many anxieties and problems. Here it was again and with the same peremptory demand that he should make decisions. Not that he was not excited, but it was an excitement so intense that it was almost agonizing.

He examined the writing carefully; there was something vaguely familiar about it, though he was at a loss to understand why until Nigma put him on the scent.

"What a pity we have nothing of Tim Reardon's to compare it with," she said.

"But I believe I have," he exclaimed, hurriedly getting out of the cockpit. "Stay here; if I haven't destroyed it, it is among the papers I brought away with me."

He was very excited; ran as fast as he could go and in a fever tumbled out a cardboard box in his bedroom, and scattered its contents on the floor. Letters, manuscripts, bills, jury notices, the butts of check books, contracts, press clippings—everything he had judged too precious to throw away, or thought that he might need in the future. On his knees and searching frantically he at last came on what he was seeking. What a blessed instinct had made him keep it! He recalled how he had retrieved it as he had been

about to toss it into the wastepaper basket. Holding it tightly he returned to the boat, and panting a little, climbed into the cockpit.

"Got it!" he exclaimed.

As he spoke, he spread out a sheet of notepaper on his knee, and to help Nigma read it with him put his arm round her waist.

"I remember telling you about this," he went on. "It was pinned to my bedroom door the night I first went to Idle Wyld, and I kept it as a souvenir. There was another on the front door, but naturally I left that where it was—never thinking of it again.

"Here it is at last. Good-night, and sleep well. TIM."

They scrutinized it closely. Its resemblance to the writing on the envelope was certainly remarkable; at least it had the same emphasis, size, and appearance, though the comparison was far from conclusive. The only identical capital letter in both was the "G" in "Good-night" and the "G's" in General Delivery and "General Post Office,"—and these were absolutely dissimilar. The "G's" on the envelope were printed, and the other was written in the conventional way. But was it not obvious that in the very manifest effort to make the address legible, the writer had left nothing to chance, and had intentionally printed it? Hal, who had some pretensions to be a student of handwriting, studied the strokes—holding both examples up against the light and then superimposing one on the other. Then in the same absorbed manner he went back to the house and returned with a pocket magnifying glass, resuming his examination with the same silent intentness. At last, laying down the envelope and the written sheet, he meditatively lit a cigarette, and announced: "It is the same writing. Tim wrote them both."

Nigma was unprepared for this; to her the dissimilar G's had definitely settled the matter.

"Those G's mean nothing," Hal went on. "The essential characteristics of a man's writing always remain the same. Every bank cashier knows that. An elaborate signature is far easier to forge than one written carelessly, and varying with the pen and the hurry the writer is in. The one is taken for granted; the other is carefully examined."

He paused; his face was clouded; he stared in front of him with far-away eyes.

"Tim's alive," he said at last.

Nigma did not answer; she too was in a bewilderment of whirling thoughts.

"What the devil ought we to do about it?" asked Hal, apparently speaking more to the roof than to the girl beside him.

She said nothing but waited for him to continue. For almost the first time she seemed to defer to him—to wish for his opinion before obtruding her own.

"I must get them down here," he remarked. "I can't go on keeping this to myself. I must get Bingy Stott and the Hares down here as soon as possible. Yet I hardly dare to go to New York myself lest I should pass Mildred and Jimmy on the way; she said she might be down early this afternoon."

"Telephone," said Nigma.

Hal agreed—yes, it would be better to telephone.

"It is too bad I have not one here," he added.

"I could take you to Point Placid," said Nigma helpfully. "I came in my own car."

"Stay to lunch, and we'll go afterwards."

It was a mile and a half to Point Placid, and Hal had no car. Mildred's cottage possessed every disadvantage. The artists had used the power boat for the shopping until its engine had broken down.

"No, I can't stay for luncheon," said Nigma.

Indeed, a glance at her watch revealed the fact that she could not stay a moment longer. But she would drop him at Point Placid, though she was afraid she would have to let him find his own way back.

Hal knew the futility of trying to sway her. Moreover, he had noticed her anxiety as she looked at her watch and her troubled air at discovering it was already so late. He decided to accept her offer and telephone from Point Placid. All the while an inner voice kept saying: "Tim's alive! Tim's alive!" in a refrain that seemed to beat in measure to his heart. In a curiously silent way they walked side by side to the highway where Nigma had left her car. He was unprepared to find it such a fine one—an enormous roadster of surpassing luxury.

There was no chauffeur, Nigma was driving herself. With practised hands she set the monster towards Point Placid, while Hal, ensconced in the deep seat beside her, felt as though it were all a dream. That inner voice, now timed to the pulsating engine, vibrated incessantly: "Tim's alive! Tim's alive! Tim's alive!"

Nigma stopped at the drugstore that Hal indicated, and they had a hurried talk as he got out. How was she to hear the outcome? It was wretched that there was no telephone at the cottage! She would be in such suspense—such a trying suspense. Perhaps the others—Bingy and Mildred—might not agree with him at all that it was Tim's writing on the envelope. Bingy ought to be asked to bring any letters he had of Tim's. Hal must remember that, it was of the greatest importance. But——

She looked at him hopelessly.

"Give me your telephone number, and I will ring you up at any hour you fix," said Hal.

"I couldn't—it—it would be too dangerous."

Dangerous?

Confused, she hurriedly softened the word to "impossible."

"What if I were here at nine o'clock exactly?" asked Hal, implying the drugstore. "Could you not ring me up?"

She thought it over for a moment, and then said yes.

"And if I am not able to," she went on, "do you think you could manage to be here tomorrow at ten, instead?"

Hal promised eagerly; of course, he could.

"Tonight at nine, or tomorrow at ten—I understand."

Leaving her, he went into the shop to get the number of the telephone there. He returned with it scrawled on a bit of paper, which he gave her. She glanced at it, placed it in her bag, and then, with the barest farewell, rolled away.

Hal went back to the booth inside and spent a maddening time trying to reach his three friends. Because of the luncheon hour none of them could be found; and all their right-hand helpers were away lunching too. He had to leave messages with numskulls, and with no conviction whatever that they would ever be delivered. But at least he left them in such a form that if one got through it would be relayed to his other friends.

Message number one was that he had just learned a most extraordinary piece of news, and would Mr. Stott kindly get Mr. and Mrs. Hare to come out to Point Placid as soon as possible. Message number two was: Would Mrs. Hare kindly ring up her husband and Mr. Bingham Stott and say that Mr. Harrison Curwen wished to see them as soon as possible to tell them of a startling piece of information that had just reached him. Message number three was: Would Mr. James Hare, on his return from luncheon, kindly communicate at once with Mrs. Hare and Mr. Stott, of the Traders' Trust Company, to say that Mr. Harrison Curwen had something extraordinary to communicate to them all, and to beg them to come out together to Point Placid at the earliest possible moment.

Bewildered numskulls, much against their will and apparently munching doughnuts, were coerced into writing down these messages on paper.

But Hal, incredulous of their coöperation, then went to the railway station and sent three telegrams. In Bingy's he begged for some specimen of Tim Reardon's handwriting.

He spent the succeeding hours in great suspense, unable to settle to anything, listening constantly for the sound of an arriving car, and disinclined to leave the house. Waiting—and waiting impatiently—is one of the most trying of human occupations. He got out the envelope again—it had been put in a drawer—and compared it anew with Reardon's writing. He felt a little shaken about his first decision which he had made so positively. A writing expert likes to have an original for every individual letter, but here such an exact basis of comparison was woefully lacking. Then he thought of Nigma—a great deal about Nigma; the way she had said “dangerous,” and the magnificent roadster. To think of Nigma—his Nigma—driving this superb Hispano-Suiza! It meant revising his whole opinion of her—though had he ever had one? She had remained as enigmatic as on the first day she had come to him.

Three o'clock. Four o'clock. A talk with Mrs. Miller about having a meal for them. Crabs, of course. At Mrs. Miller's directions, proceeding from a safe distance, Hal filled a small tin tub full of crabs and water, and put it on a burner of the kerosene stove with a board on top. It did not seem very humane, but Mrs. Miller said that was the way it should be done, and Lorblessim the crabs did not mind.

Five o'clock. Were there enough ingredients for cocktails? Was there sufficient Scotch? Two siphons of soda-water were found and put to chill in the ice chest. Still there was no arriving car, and the interminable afternoon

dragged on. Some people passed in a boat. A little girl came in to ask if they had seen her dog. The sun relented—sank. Perhaps they would not come at all. Mrs. Miller and he might be left alone to devour all those bright red crabs, now laid out on the table.

But here they were! Prolonged honks, and the sound of a heavy car grinding to a standstill, mingled with voices and the snap of opening doors. Hal rushed out; yes, it was Bingy's car, and they were all there, advancing towards him. As soon as they passed inside—one entered at the kitchen door—Hal led them to the little sitting room and beyond earshot of Mrs. Miller. They were buzzing with questions. What did it all mean? What had happened? All the messages had apparently got through, and all the telegrams, whetting their curiosity to the utmost.

Exhilarated by their ride, wind blown and happy, they seated themselves and lit cigarettes.

Hal briefly told his story, showing them the envelope, and then the specimen of Reardon's writing. It was strangely sobering; the chatter and exclamations ceased. Bingy was the most disturbed; it caused him to speak irritably and with a kind of resentment. Who was this woman who had followed Felice, and by what right had she done so? He said it was an outrageous thing to do, and went on in this strain quite heatedly. In this fantastic championing of his adored one he might have sidetracked the whole issue had not Mildred imperiously checked him.

"We want to decide whether this is Reardon's writing or not," she said, indicating the envelope. "How it got here is relatively unimportant."

Bingy sullenly subsided. Pale and anxious, his eyes moved restlessly behind his spectacles.

"Did you bring any of Tim's letters that I asked for in my telegram?" said Hal.

Bingy produced them. His hands were trembling, and it was in a nervous, jerky way that he spread the letters out. There were four, all typewritten.

"I have only his signatures," said Bingy.

These were compared with the envelope and with the slip Hal had found that night on his bedroom door. He gave them his magnifying glass, pointing out the similarities that had already decided him. He was listened to breathlessly; Reardon's life or death seemed hanging in the balance.

"It is more than a resemblance of writing," said Mildred, when he had finished. "Who else could conceivably be writing to Felice? And why should there be all this stealth and secrecy if it were not from Tim?"

"Yes, you are right," said Jimmy. "It can't be explained on any other basis."

"And everything she has done bears it out," agreed Hal. "First she separates from her mother, ostensibly to earn her own living; then she slips into that job of Mildred's, making the transition easy; then she fades from our view; then she haunts the post office, demanding a letter under an assumed name. It must have all been arranged beforehand between her and Tim."

Mildred and Jimmy murmured assentingly, but Bingy's voice overrode theirs in indignant denial.

"Felice is incapable of such deception," he protested. "I—I cannot sit here and have her reputation blackened. She could explain everything—I know she could explain everything. I cannot sit here, and——"

He broke off inarticulately, his emotion overmastering him.

"Nobody is blackening anybody," put in Jimmy with rough good nature. "Don't be an ass, Bingy. Here are a lot of facts, and it is common sense to see where they lead us to."

"They lead us to one tremendous thing—that Tim's alive," said Hal.

"Yes, Tim's alive; that now seems almost certain," said Mildred.

Jimmy in his downright way loudly agreed with her. Only an idiot could doubt it. At this all three regarded Bingy, huddled miserably in his chair. How could he continue to resist such an unassailable deduction?

Bingy did not try. His preoccupation was so evidently concerned with Felice that Hal wondered if he thought of Tim at all. Sunk in dejection and apparently oblivious of their presence, he presented a picture of anguish. Finally Mildred sprang up, and shaking him playfully, forced him to his feet; and then still gayly chiding, and with her arm round him, made him accompany her out of doors. A few minutes later she brought him back, restored and apologetic.

"Mildred has shown me that I was far too hasty in my conclusions," he said. "And unkind too, to the three best friends I have in the world."

Bleakly, he sought forgiveness.

Mrs. Miller's announcement of crabs and cocktails brought a very welcome diversion.

Gathered round the table, the conversation was resumed, but a good deal more cheerfully. While Mrs. Miller hovered about, it was largely concerned where to bed Bingy for the night, and in sending away his chauffeur to sleep at the hotel. Mrs. Miller did not like Jake, and their relations were already strained; so he was dismissed without even a crab to help him on his way.

When all these matters had been settled and Mrs. Miller had definitely withdrawn, they hastened to return to the subject that dominated all their minds.

"One thing is plain as daylight," began Jimmy Hare.

"This lets Anne out. It is Felice, not Anne, who is the dark horse in the case. It makes me goddam sorry for Anne—the way she has been misjudged and all that."

Mildred agreed, though less warmly.

"I still don't see why she was making those secret visits to Dyart," she said. "But it really seems a proof of her absolute innocence that she was always so positive that Tim was dead. People made so much of that against her, but I should say it was tremendously in her favor."

"I wish somebody would talk about Felice," said Bingy, in an injured tone. "We can't leave her to go on alone like this. It breaks my heart to think of Felice in that horrible studio with the dog painter."

Mildred sighed.

"If we only knew how to convince her that we are her friends and love her," she remarked. "Though we must not do anything that looks like pursuing her—running her down like a truant. I was wondering whether Jimmy might not meet her casually on the street and tell her all this. That we love her and want her back, yet don't wish to be officious. Jimmy has the right tactlessness to say it so much better than any of the rest of us. Such untutored minds are sometimes so much better——"

"My God!" cried Jimmy. "Untutored—what the hell!"

"No, it is I that should do it," said Bingy. "Quite simply, you know; just that we love her; that our only thought is her welfare, her happiness——"

"You would bungle it," interrupted Jimmy. "Besides, you may be the whole trouble. I don't mean it in any wounding way, Bingy, but possibly you have been almost too devoted. Speaking as an untutored person——"

"Oh, do shut up," exclaimed Mildred.

"I don't believe she cares for any of us," put in Hal. "I'm not at all sure that she hasn't found all our love and

affection very burdensome. They are terrible things when you don't want them, and if they are offered by the wrong people. Perhaps without our realizing it we made her too answerable to us for everything she did; treated her too much like a child, and all that."

"Hal is right," said Mildred.

"Though he might have pointed it out sooner," growled Jimmy. "Where are we at? Oh, yes!—Casting my own vote to make it unanimous, it is up to me then to get her back. Tell me exactly where the place is, Hal, and the right sort of time for hiding in the bushes. Seven o'clock?"

The cottage was so far away from the highway and so quiet that the sudden sound of an arriving car was startling. They gazed at one another in surprise. Who could it be? Hardly anybody knew that they were at Point Placid at all. The car came to a stop at the kitchen door, though its engine continued to hum hoarsely. They heard Mrs. Miller speaking to someone at the door, and then a moment later who should enter but Nigma!

She was in white and her silken black head was bare. Erect, and with her usual confident air, she was so little discomposed that she might have been dropping in on friends she knew well; and the lamplight enhancing the contrast between her raven hair and creamy white complexion made her seem more beautiful than she was.

Hal rose with an exclamation of welcome. The two other men, exchanging a questioning glance, rose also. Mildred looked thunderstruck.

"No, thank you, I won't stay," said Nigma, smiling unconcernedly at the little party. "But I have just learned something that I thought you should all know at once. Felice is on her way West; she left at two o'clock."

Felice—on her way West?

Hal, in a ghost of a voice, asked where.

"Miss Bestwith saw her tickets; ransacked her bag when

she wasn't there. To Catalina Island in California, and the envelope they were in was marked Miss Mary Dain."

For an instant their stupefaction at the news made them dumb. Then Bingy, in a strangled voice, demanded to have it repeated, while the motor, humming with a restless and menacing note, seemed to be in key with his emotion.

"May I ask how you learned this?" asked Mildred. Her intonation was cold, almost disdainful.

Nigma gave a little laugh; her radiant humor was proof against snubs.

"I bought a dog and took it there to have its portrait painted," she explained. "I scarcely had to ask Miss Bestwith anything, though that was why I went. She was so bursting with it that she could hardly wait to tell me. Here are the dates and descriptions of her tickets; the old lady, like the thorough busybody she is, copied them down."

Hal took the scrap of paper Nigma passed to him, but he did not look at it.

"What on earth should we do about it?" he asked.

There was no answer from anybody. They were still in the throes of trying to adjust themselves to this new and surprising development. The motor hummed insistently as though urging them to a decision; Nigma had an air of wishing to take her departure, but seemed withheld either by consideration or constraint. Bingy had reached for the scrap of paper and was studying it somberly. Jimmy, drumming with his fingers on the table and tilting back in his chair, was making the inarticulate noises that with him always accompanied reflection.

Hal said afterwards that his own sudden resolution must have been due to a subconscious hatred of Point Placid. But whatever it was due to, it was born that minute. Dramatically he announced that he meant to take the first train next day and follow Felice.

"I can't leave it like this," he added. "I am going to find

her whether she likes it or not, and learn what all this mystery is about."

"I'll come too," exclaimed Bingy. "What's the bank—what's anything——"

In the general outburst of expostulation his offer provoked Hal could be heard saying he was not invited.

"That's a crazy idea, Bingy," he went on. "You would not only end yourself at the bank, but you would eat your heart out and be a nuisance. It is altogether so different with me. I can go on working cheerfully and filling in the time, no matter how long it takes. Besides, alone, it will look less like a pursuit."

"Pursuit!" repeated Bingy, in a wounded voice. "What a word for a noble, chivalrous, self-sacrificing impulse to——"

"Hal means you are far too much in earnest," said Mildred soothingly to him. "You would frighten her by your very passion to help her. You would be like a litigant losing his case because he would not employ a lawyer. Besides, how foolish it would be to ruin your career."

"What I want to know, Hal—is how you are so sure of finding her at that Cat Island?" put in Jimmy.

"I am not," said Hal. "But I am going to have a good try."

"You ought to sleep on it," said Mildred, who was turning against the proposal. "You would be mad to rush off like this at a whim. Think it over a bit first; sleep on it."

But Hal was inspired by a determination that surprised even himself. Turning to Nigma he asked her in a low voice if she were returning to New York—and if so, could she take him with her.

She could.

He made a whirlwind departure, not even waiting to take the barest necessities with him. Delay would have been fatal; Mildred's face showed him that. It was now or

never. With nothing but his manuscript in his pocket and his portable typewriter in his hand, he tore himself away from that bewildered little company and was off with Nigma before they could completely realize what had happened.

Chapter XIX

IT WAS a comfort to find how enthusiastically Nigma approved of his decision, though she said she would never get over her surprise. She bubbled with merriment at the sensation he had caused, telling him if he had waited Mildred would never have allowed him to go. Bingy, too, might have become very troublesome. Hal agreed with her. It was better to bolt while the others still had their mouths open.

It was a warm and lovely night, the heat deliciously tempered by the proximity of the sea and the speed of their traveling. Nigma drove well, fast on the open stretches and cautious at the turns. One could talk to her without any uneasy glancing at the road in front. They talked all the way to the ferry, Nigma telling him with much more detail of her visit to Miss Bestwith's, though the recurring subject was always Felice. Try as they would it seemed impossible to find a reason for her conduct. It was inexplicable. The only thing that seemed to stand out definitely was that she had been working on a settled plan. A settled plan in which Tim Reardon apparently must have had a share. How important that share was seemed the real key of the riddle.

"If they had been in love with each other it would certainly have been a terrible situation," said Nigma. "It is one of the prohibited degrees where a divorce would make no difference. For surely no man anywhere is allowed to marry his wife's daughter?"

"No, he isn't," said Hal, "and even in an irregular con-

nection there would be an added frightful odium—far too frightful for any girl as sensitive as Felice to undertake. Moreover, I believe the law makes it a crime.”

Snatching a moment from the road, Nigma looked into his face.

“Yet it isn’t really, not in nature.”

“No, of course not, but the point is that Tim was nearly fifty and she has just turned twenty-one. Twenty-six years at least between them—far too much for a love affair in any case.”

“Such things have happened before,” persisted Nigma. “It is far from uncommon for unfledged girls to fall in love with men much older than themselves, and I remember your telling me how devoted they were to each other.”

They discussed it for miles, though Hal remained as unconvinced as he had been at the beginning. He knew them both and Nigma did not—that was why they disagreed, he said. Tim was a very extraordinary person; you could not stuff Tim into a classification like a letter into a file. Nor could you either with Felice. They were both too vivid, too unusual. Besides, what of Anne? They could not ignore Anne. Tim seemed extremely fond of her and she was almost dazzlingly beautiful—absolutely outshone Felice, and made her look like a little movie doll. Hal could not bring himself to believe that there had been anything like a love affair between Tim and his stepdaughter.

“Yet why should he be writing to her, and she going off secretly to meet him?” asked Nigma. “It is on that supposition that you are following her, isn’t it? That’s the animating idea, surely?”

“God knows what my animating idea is,” said Hal helplessly. “It is all intermingled with a burning curiosity and a desire to help the poor kid, I suppose; and to help Tim too, of course, if he be alive and in some frightful

mess; and to get away to a country where it is reasonably cool and mosquitoes don't tear you limb from limb."

The increasing traffic began to make conversation difficult; there was a race to the ferry and they were lucky enough to reach it before the chain went down. On the New York side Hal would have relieved Nigma of the uninviting task of taking him to Grand Central Station, but she insisted on doing so. At the station, with the same unexpected consideration, she said she would wait for him. There was something hectic in her gayety; something keyed up and strange; he had never seen her before in such a humor. She said he had to take the new dog she had bought to have its portrait painted, and for that reason wanted to know his reservations. It would be put on the train as a good-bye present. She seemed oddly entertained by the idea.

He took a lower berth on the Twentieth Century Limited leaving for Chicago next day at two forty-five and arranged to have a telegram sent reserving another on the outgoing Santa Fe Chief to Los Angeles. Fortunately he had enough money; he had drawn lavishly before taking up his abode at the cottage, and thus he was easily able to buy his railway ticket to Los Angeles. When he returned to Nigma, whom he found not without difficulty, she made him show her the tickets he was still carrying in his hand. Examining them she said there was nothing in the world more romantic than tickets—and please, where would he like to go next?

"It's our last time together," he said. "Couldn't we celebrate it?"

Smiling, she refused. She was already later than she ought to be. But she would be very willing to drop him at Lexington Avenue.

But Hal remarked that his apartment would be the unsafest place in New York for him. A fugitive could not

return to the old familiar haunts without the certainty of recapture. As like as not Bingy and Mildred were already on their way there. No, he would go to a hotel, buy what he needed the next morning and avoid every place where he was known. That was what a wise fugitive would do; bury himself out of sight in the purlieus of a great city.

Accordingly Nigma dropped him in front of a second-class hotel on Eighth Avenue with a name that he had always liked. Its melodious name was all he knew about it. Whatever it was like within, it was abominably strict and fussy outside. A doorman kept ordering Nigma away all the while she and Hal were trying to say good-bye. It was a very short while and most of it was spent in trying to placate the doorman. In fact, they scarcely said anything beyond the commonplaces that Hal reproached himself with afterwards. It was the wretchedest of farewells; a word, the pressure of a gloved hand, and she was off; and the accursed doorman even objected to his looking after her.

"Stand back, please, sir; stand back; you are blocking the gentleman's car."

Hal enjoyed being a fugitive. With all the pleasurable thrills of an escaping bank robber he outfitted himself the next day and carried everything back with him in an awaiting taxi. He enjoyed his unattended departure from New York, and though at Chicago he might have spent part of his hours of waiting by calling on an important editor, he preferred the noble solitude of a room at the Blackstone. In all this it was not only to evade Mildred and Bingy. He was curiously bemused; glad to be by himself; to be at last alone with his thoughts instead of sharing them incessantly with other people. In a way it redeemed the fantasy of this adventure that he was finding something he had been unconsciously craving.

As he rolled out of Chicago in the Chief it was in the same agreeable humor with himself and the purpose that had impelled him. Watching the green signal lights guiding them out of the vast murk of the city, and trying to accustom himself to the shiny new luggage that was so unfamiliarly his, he reclined in his seat, smoking the last cigarette that would be allowed in his Pullman. Whether he would find Felice or not—or Tim—was not in his mind at all. The thrill was in leaving all that stifling country behind him for the unknown shores of the Pacific. In spite of the delirious gush of his railway folder Catalina Island sounded delightful to him. One could read through the purple lines and be still convinced, in spite of the balderdash, that it was really attractive. One could live in a tent; one could fish for strange monsters; one could look through glass-bottomed boats at coral gardens. There were no mosquitoes; the temperature never rising above eighty something, nor falling below fifty something else, gave it a salubrity that made the folder almost hysterical. Hal was learning all this when the porter's shadow fell across him. Guiltily he dropped his cigarette, but it was not that at all. The porter had come to tell him that the lady in drawing room A wished to see him.

Hal demurred; it was probably a mistake; his name was Mr. Harrison Curwen.

"Yes, that's it," said the porter encouragingly. "That's the name the lady said. You are the gentleman she meant all right."

Hal rose in some surprise, and walking the length of the car, knocked at A. He had a conviction, perhaps induced by the sight of his fellow passengers, that he was going to be bored by the most casual of acquaintances.

The door opened and to his amazement revealed Nigma! Yes, incredibly Nigma! He stood looking at her, unable to believe his eyes. She smiled an invitation for him to enter,

and pushing the door shut, invited him to take a seat beside her. The sofa was stacked with her luggage; more filled the racks overhead; there was no apparent sign of anyone sharing the little cabin with her.

It was as though he were dreaming. It was the most incredible thing that had ever happened to him. He felt that if he took his eyes off her she would somehow vanish.

Murmuring his astonishment he took her hand.

"What does it mean?" he asked.

Her eyes shone luminously. Her face under the harsh light seemed very pale.

"I have cut the painter," she said.

Hal waited for her to go on. Did that imply she had a husband?

"I caught it from you," she continued with a pathetic kind of archness. "It suddenly occurred to me that I would be wild and free too."

As he sat there still in a state of stupefaction, she added, not without irony: "Do you mind?"

"But all the way——? Positively going with me to Catalina?"

She bent her head.

"I thought you might like it," she said.

It was beyond Hal at that moment to be altogether coherent. He seemed to be asking all his questions at once. But one definitely formed itself. What did she mean about cutting the painter?

Her expression changed; there was no playfulness in her eyes now. When she spoke it was with the peculiar jerkiness that often cloaks emotion.

"I was in a jam. It is a vulgar kind of word, but so was the thing. I have been in a jam for two years or more, and seemed unable to get out. Then I suddenly decided I was tired of it. In an inexplicable kind of way it was due to you. Not caring—I don't mean that. I mean if you could

do such a thing, why couldn't I? It really seemed so simple—just to walk out and buy a ticket for California.”

Her hand tightened on his.

“I suppose I needed help across the gap, Hal. I knew I could count on you, you know. One gets so sunk in servitude that it is not easy—to walk away. But I won't be a nuisance if you will let me come with you; all I want is to be prevented from faltering. Don't ask me anything more now, I have told you all I am able to.”

Hal put no more questions. This lovely, melting creature was seeking sympathy, which was much pleasanter to give than to continue inquiries from which she so evidently shrank. He had a fellow feeling for her almost quivering reluctance to reveal the reasons of her flight. Her lightness was assumed; beneath it was a very real suffering. But she was still the same Nigma even in her apparent surrender—even in her misleading helplessness and tenderness. She gently restrained his ardor; there were a great many no's in Hal's effort to be sympathetic; she was not running away with him, she said. She was running away from herself. If he could once understand that, and not fill his head with foolish fancies, she would be thankful for his company. She might even be of help to him, casting a mantle of respectability over herself by means of a typewriter. A girl could go anywhere with a man if she had a typewriter. No, she was not joking at all; she would buy one and be his secretary. That is, if he wanted her; if he would not consider her a frightful nuisance.

It was a singular situation—singular, a little bewildering, and altogether delightful. And so modern, so audacious—a spiritual elopement. They would live together on their island like Paul and Virginia, and he would wear striped trousers and a prodigious straw hat. When they returned to their palm-thatched hut she would take the banana leaves off her typewriter and clatter to the dictation of

Paul's immortal works. It was an alluring picture. Hal, holding her hand, elaborated on it richly. When at last she sent him away she put her arms round his neck and kissed him, but so sweetly and with so little provocation that she might indeed have been Virginia herself. Hal carried the fragrance of that moment back to his seat in the car. How strange it seemed to him that all this had happened since he had left it hardly an hour before.

That first evening together gave the keynote, as it were, of their whole trip across the continent. The spiritual elopement had been followed by a spiritual honeymoon, which included long hours seated side by side on the observation platform watching the desolately picturesque landscape disappearing behind them. They read, played cards and dominoes, took brisk little walks when the train stopped, and talked interminably. But Nigma never came any nearer to self-revelation. It was marvelous how she evaded it even in their increasing intimacy. Not that Hal made any further efforts to extort her confidence. He had received too many wounds himself in life not to respect this concealment of hers. Wounds should be covered up. It was really a form of egoism to display them. Though it must be admitted he was somewhat expansive about his own scarred past.

As they neared their destination a disturbing problem presented itself. Her name? An exacting world was always demanding one's name. Hal, with some confusion, proffered his own. Would not that perhaps be the simplest way out of the dilemma? But Nigma, very pink, preferred the name of Oliver. The owner of the shop where she had bought her dog had been named Oliver. He had been so kind in taking it back that Nigma decided thus to reward him indirectly. She decided, too, that as Mrs. Oliver she would have more independence than as Miss Oliver. Mrs. Helen Oliver, whose ex-husband was in business in New

York. It was all settled in the twinkling of an eye. As they drove to a hotel, judging it better to have a rest before proceeding the next day to Catalina, Nigma hinted that she was quite well off. She wanted a sitting room; Hal must not think her wildly extravagant. Besides, a sitting room would always pacify hotel morality.

Their intimacy continued under new conditions. Hal had decorously placed himself on another floor, but thanks to the sitting room they could always be together. In the afternoon—they had arrived at nine—they took a walk, bought a full-sized typewriter in an imposing case; learned all about going to Catalina Island; dined alone in their room. Its air seemed the best part of Los Angeles—otherwise it was a sprawling, shabby, dusty, immensely overgrown place—the balmy air and groups of Mexicans in pointed hats. Their windows were wide open, a silvery new moon floated in the sky, they felt encouraged and happy. Catalina with that moon ought to be a paradise.

Chapter XX

ON GETTING off the boat the next day they found Catalina rather a confusing paradise, and in its crowds of holiday-making trippers just a little reminiscent of Coney Island. But there was a helpful person in a Ford who seemed to have been sent from heaven to meet them. The helpful person in the Ford, after suggesting the best hotel, then a furnished cottage belonging to his brother-in-law, then two rooms over a shop, said sure, he knew where they could live in tents. It was called Abney's de Lux Camp Hotel and represented a form of accommodation altogether new in Hal's or Nigma's experience; a compact block of perhaps a hundred square tents, arranged with military precision, and all floored and provided with running water.

What management there was seemed very casual. A boy of fifteen, with a tennis racquet in his hand, said he would tell his mother; and a serious-looking woman, emerging from a tent with a broom, said she would show them a tent. She evinced no surprise when they demanded two tents, merely stating that the rate was three dollars a week each and that they must not play musical instruments. If they refrained from playing musical instruments it seemed to matter very little to the serious woman with the broom whatever else they might do. But she was not unhelpful, however, said there was a safe in the office and a telephone, and that there were several places near by where they could get their meals. Then she left them gazing about rather blankly in one of their new abodes. There was something disturbingly public in such a way of living; the furniture was meager in the extreme; to enter you lifted

a flap, and to shut yourself in—you dropped it. The sun, shining through the thin brown canvas, gave an ample and golden light.

Later, they appreciated that these tents were merely sleeping places for occupants who seemed to wear nothing but bathing suits and were out all day; and who could be met thus attired in the streets or shops. Catalina was a sort of summer playground for thousands of holiday-makers from Los Angeles, and its life was almost wholly in the open air. Its wide rim of shore was animated by bathers and boats, and the sea on this sheltered side was lakelike in its smoothness. Innumerable little shops of the Coney Island type sold everything that trippers might need, and many that they would be better without. Barkers hailed you; photographers took your picture while you waited; proprietors of glass-bottomed boats besought you to float over coral gardens. It was all very noisy, happy, and common, with a sprinkling of beings from another world; the world of the graceful, slender yachts, of the big fashionable hotel, of the golf course and tennis courts. The air was warm but exhilarating. It was far from being an unattractive place.

But how were they to find Felice in such teeming thousands of people? What an apparently insurmountable task they had set themselves! In such a holiday town, with a population consisting almost entirely of transient strangers, how impossible it would be to pursue any inquiries. An ordinary town was made up of a large number of fixed inhabitants with a few strangers. Catalina was a city of strangers with a handful of inhabitants.

At Hal's discouragement Nigma said there were two things in their favor. They knew Felice's assumed name and they knew she was short of money, for she had taken her berths on tourist sleepers, and could not have earned much with her posing.

"There are very few places for a young girl alone to stay in," said Nigma. "Tomorrow I shall get a list of them."

"While I could try the post office with a proper discretion," said Hal. "I think I'd better more or less station myself there. It is the one converging focus of such a place as this."

They were rowing on the bay in a boat Hal had hired. Some young people were swimming alongside a yacht; another under towering white canvas was cutting sharply across them with a hissing bow; power boats chugged; lobster-tinted figures in canoes were racing one another with shouts of laughter; everywhere there were boats, bathers, movement, noise, and sparkling water.

"If I could ever get used to this place I believe I might like it," said Hal.

Nigma, smiling at him, remarked that she liked it already.

"Once I have been in that water I know I shall never have a care again," she said. "I have the happy feeling of a puppy in a basket."

Hal made it two puppies in a basket.

Both laughing, Hal had to be prevented from pursuing the subject further. But Nigma's humor, though more restrained, was as audacious as his. They were both in the spirit of their absurd adventure, which somehow at that moment seemed more absurd than ever. Would it really matter very much if they never found Felice at all? Every interest save in themselves was ebbing fast. They rowed to a little bay and sat hand in hand in their grounded boat, which afloat would not permit of such a cosiness. It was all beautiful, peaceful, perfect.

"And to think how very, very nearly I did not come!" exclaimed Nigma.

"And I might still have been fishing for crabs off that

little pier," said Hal. "It must have been all predestined like the course of the stars. Though I do hope Mildred is not going to take it too much to heart; I love Mildred, you know, though I don't seem to have acted much like it. I wrote her an abject little note after leaving New York."

A shadow passed across Nigma's face. She had not even done as much as that; with a little gesture she indicated the finality of her own disappearance.

"But——" said Hal, and then hesitated. The obvious questions, forming on his lips, never left them.

"Of course I did not go without—without an explanation," Nigma remarked in evident repugnance at the recollection. "I did not want to have a hue and cry after me, and all that. There are some things in life one has to face without flinching and end them once for all."

Hal listened in silence, determined not to appear inquisitive, though the effort was not easy.

After a pause, he said: "I hope this false name of yours is not going to be a fearful nuisance about your letters?"

Nigma laughed. Hal had called it her what-the-hell laugh. It was deliciously impudent, and dismissive of jarring thoughts.

"The only tie I have left is with my bank," she said. "It is their business to listen and then do what I tell them; it is the only ideal human relationship—a girl and a bank."

This little talk, short though it was, peopled their bay with phantoms. Phantoms of Mildred and Bingy, the unknown phantoms of Nigma's past. The perfect peace wafted itself away. They pushed off their boat, and in rather an introspective mood rowed back whence they had come.

The next day they began a routine that was not unenjoyable. Hal wrote all the morning while Nigma started on a systematic search for Felice. With a map of the town and an untiring patience she set herself to a task that Hal

now realized was almost hopeless. There was such an incalculable transient population flowing in and ebbing out in tides. But Nigma, undiscouraged, and with much assistance from the Women's Exchange—a curious, coöperative shop where housewives could put a dozen pies on sale or a basket of doughnuts—first eliminated all the places where a young girl alone was likely to find a lodging. She also tried the Young Women's Christian Association, and made friends with a resident Catholic priest—never came back indeed without the tale of some amusing little adventure.

Their meals were the least attractive part of their strange life together. The overcrowded eating-houses—they could not be called restaurants—were at best only tolerable. And when you had finished your meal it was impossible to resist the compulsion to get rid of you. Buying an alcohol stove to make their own tea they more and more relied on episodic repasts from the Women's Exchange. But always in every walk, or excursion, or moonlight stroll amongst the crowds on the beach, they kept looking for Felice. They were constantly trailing fair-haired girls only to be disappointed in the end, and made a point of haunting the post office at the midday mail delivery.

Hal himself had refrained from making any request for letters. The only person who knew his address and could therefore write to him was Mildred; and he shrank from hearing from Mildred, knowing how reproachful she would be. He had marred her summer by running away as he had, and his only justification would be to find Felice. Not finding her, he could not put himself in the way of Mildred's letter—which he knew must be there. Then too he was troubled about Bingy. It would not be very pleasant to hear that Bingy was already on his way to Catalina. He pictured Bingy in a third tent and his woebegone face added to their picnics. No, he would keep away from

that post office as long as he could. Or rather from that window marked "General Delivery" where one had to stand in a queue.

But of course before the week was out he was obliged to succumb. One day he went alone, attaching himself to the queue. Slowly he reached the window.

"Any letters for Mr. Harrison Curwen?"

A telegram was handed him; it was from Mildred. How he had misjudged her! Mildred might make you do things but she was never nagging. Wise, tender, and sweet she was in reality the most understanding woman in the world.

Terribly disappointed but feel you are doing the right thing. Meanwhile am holding back Bingy not without difficulty. Don't trouble to write but telegraph often. Love and blessing,
MILDRED.

He was turning away when a man spoke to him, a pleasant-looking man of about sixty with gray, friendly eyes and a quiet, assured manner as though he were somebody of local importance—a judge or a doctor.

"I hope you are enjoying your stay here," said the stranger as though he owned the island. "I am a real estate man, J. W. Black is my name, but please don't think I'm soliciting you in any business way. Our first idea here is always to make visitors comfortable; be sure they're satisfied and not overcharged nor put to any inconvenience. You could have your mail addressed to my box if you like; it was to tell you this that I took the liberty of accosting you."

He was such a pleasant man, and with such a pleasant voice and with such a pleasant ripple at the corners of his mouth when he smiled that Hal reconsidered the brusque answer he had been on the point of making. Disarmed, he said he could not dream of imposing so far on Mr. Black's

good nature; besides, it was no great hardship to stand in a queue occasionally.

"It would be no obligation," continued Mr. Black. "We still have a flavor of the old Spanish days here, and time to think of other things than business. The important thing to us is to make our visitors happy."

Hal was turning away after a smile and a word of thanks when Mr. Black indicated he would accompany him part of the way. Hal was not disinclined, he rather liked Mr. Black; his courtesy and kindliness were extremely winning, and when they parted a little later on it was with no obtrusion of any cloven hoof; not a single reference to eligible real estate that would double in value within the year.

How little he realized as he went off with Nigma for their afternoon swim that he was soon to meet Mr. Black again under very changed conditions.

Chapter XXI

THE next morning as he sat absorbed in his work he was surprised by Nigma's unexpected entrance. Had he lost all idea of time? It was tacitly understood he was to toil in solitude until noon. Glancing at his watch on the table, which showed it was five minutes past eleven, and with the faintest indication of annoyance, he looked up. But any such feeling disappeared as he noticed how excited and breathless she looked.

"I have found her," she cried out. "I have found Felice!"

"Found her?" Hal could scarcely believe his ears.

"Yes, working as a waitress in a place called the Bon Ton Ice Cream Parlors. You know the place, Hal—that big one near the pier where it was always too crowded to be served."

Nigma's eyes were shining. Excitement was marvelously becoming to her. Drawing up a wicker chair and seating herself beside him she eagerly continued her story.

"I went in there to get an ice-cream soda—it was the merest accident. I saw her behind a marble counter where she had charge of the tea and coffee urns. She has actually been there all the time; lives above the shop with several of the other girls. It was quite empty in the sort of tea room they have at one end and my waitress did not need any prompting at all—she was an Iowa school-teacher and simply dying to talk to anybody in the least sympathetic. Homesick, you know; hating this place like poison; found it a bond that I was from New York."

Hal was electrified. To have found Felice like that almost under their noses; they passed the place constantly

on their way to bathe. But Nigma cut short such incoherencies; there was lots more to tell—lots more.

“She goes for a walk every night at eight,” she went on, bubbling with triumph. “Has a little dog, and goes for a walk every night at eight. Actually I overheard it; I felt like Sherlock Holmes; this will give us a chance of talking to her alone. It was through a soda-fountain young man who had sneaked away to snatch a minute with her. A good-looking boy from some college, my waitress told me; and he said more in a few seconds than I could have believed humanly possible. Such a smitten boy and so miserable since the man in the yachting cap had slipped Felice that note. Oh, he had seen it; she could not fool him, and why had it changed her like that so she would hardly even look at him now. It was a lightning bit of courtship while he pretended to rub the counter with a towel. She had never been the same since the man with the yachting cap. Couldn’t he wait for her tonight after hours? Gee, it was hard to be thrown down like that—thrown down hard. But Felice’s face was obstinate, and though I could not hear what she said, it was plainly no. Very much no; and she kept moving away while he followed her, pretending to polish the counter. Then she snapped out something so crossly that he went away. Threatened to appeal to the proprietor, or something, I imagine. My waitress said she was a stuck-up piece and went about with her nose in the air as though they all had the plague. She was much disliked and was called the duchess.”

With scarcely an intermission, though her expression suddenly changed, Nigma went on to say that she had seen the man about the power boat, but thought that eight dollars a day was far too much to pay. Especially since they could get one from the boathouse——

Hal was utterly astonished. What insanity had taken possession of her? Then, while she still continued to talk

about the other boat at six dollars, her finger pointed warningly at the corner of the tent. It was a stormy day, gray and overcast, with occasional intermissions of sunshine. One of these brilliant intermissions suddenly illumined the tent, revealing in the direction of Nigma's finger and against the canvas, now no longer opaque, the silhouette of a man crouched down, and apparently eavesdropping.

Hal sprang up, and in an instant was outside the tent and making his way round it to pounce on the intruder. What was his amazement to recognize his recent friend, Mr. J. W. Black, starting guiltily to his feet! But he did not run; on the contrary, he smiled in that very pleasant way of his and said that Hal had taken him at a disadvantage.

"I was coming to see you," he remarked. "But as nobody seemed very sure of the number of your tent, and as I was afraid of disturbing a lady undressing or something, I have been listening around in the hope of locating you."

He was suavity itself, the touch of the old Spanish days was charmingly apparent, but Hal found it difficult to dismiss the memory of that crouching figure with an ear at the tent lacings.

"What do you want?" he demanded with a rudeness he did not try to conceal.

"Just a few words with you, if you would not mind," answered Mr. Black. He seemed altogether unruffled; almost benign. "A little talk—a confidential little talk—about a matter of some importance."

"You are wasting your time," said Hal. "I don't want to buy anything. Please be so kind as to go away."

He turned to indicate that the interview was finished. But Mr. Black followed. As they reached the flap that served as the tent's door, Mr. Black, not at all unamiably, refused to be left outside.

"I must talk to you," he said. "This isn't anything about lots or houses, it is about a gentleman who recently disappeared so mysteriously from his home in Long Island."

Hal stared at him, unable to speak. He meant Tim Reardon.

"Permit me," said the stranger, holding up the flap of the tent for Hal to enter first. As in a dream Hal did so, Mr. Black close behind him. Nigma, who had been expecting a very different dénouement, half rose to meet them, looking extremely surprised.

"I won't take more than a moment of your time," said Mr. Black, courteously including Nigma in this remark. "You will not mind my drawing up a chair, perhaps, and it would be as well to be a little guarded, since this is not a matter that any of us would care to have overheard." His own voice sank as he spoke, indicating the need of precaution.

Hal thought it sounded oddly from a man he had just caught eavesdropping himself. In suspense and vaguely uneasy, he watched Mr. Black draw a chair close to theirs and seat himself as confidently as the family doctor whom he resembled. Had he taken Nigma's wrist and felt her pulse it would scarcely have surprised Hal. But Nigma seemed to scent something more sinister. There was repulsion, almost fear in her dilating eyes and quivering nostrils.

"It is all very simple," said Mr. Black. "It is important for me to know what exactly it was that brought you here."

"And by what right do you ask such an incredibly impertinent question," said Hal.

Mr. Black raised a pacifying hand.

"Please don't take a tone that will make discussion impossible," he said. "I am in the very unfortunate position

of having to threaten you with something in case you refuse. Believe me, my dear young people, nothing is more utterly repugnant to me. I simply wish to propose a dicker—a bargain. I am interested to learn the reasons that brought you here, and am in a position to make it very unpleasant for you in case you do refuse. But I am trusting you will not refuse. Let us be frank. I will put my cards on the table; did you not receive or intercept a message from John T. Reardon?"

Hal masked his feelings, which were in a tumult. Outwardly he seemed merely calm and defensive, with a very stony look in his blue eyes.

"What are you threatening?" he demanded.

Mr. Black looked depressed.

"I fear you have brought yourselves, quite innocently of course, within the scope of the Mann Act. In fact, this lady's husband, Mr. Frederick Charles Tisdale"—here he indicated Nigma—"has sworn out a complaint which it is within my discretion to put into operation."

Hal sat there dumbfounded. The Mann Act! Nigma's husband! His brain reeled.

But Nigma, though pale, retained her composure.

"There is no basis for such a charge," she said. "I occupied my own drawing room on the way out; had my own suite at the hotel in Los Angeles; and am here occupying a tent of my own. I am acting as Mr. Curwen's secretary while securing the necessary steps to get a divorce. My position, as well as Mr. Curwen's, is quite unassailable."

"I know, I know," returned Mr. Black deprecatorily. "The facts are entirely as you claim. I can only cause you a temporary inconvenience, but just the same it will be far from agreeable. As you are strangers here, you will probably be unable to give the necessary bond and will be both locked up."

"Locked up!" exclaimed Hal. He was too amazed to be angry.

"You are both here because of some secret information you have received about Mr. John T. Reardon," said Mr. Black. "Could you not bring yourselves to divulge it and save us—yes, I very much include myself—from going to such painful extremities."

"I don't know what you are talking about," said Hal. "I am a novelist, coming here to work on my new book. This young lady is helping me. As far as she and I are concerned, Mr. Black, you can go plumb to hell—you and your Mann Act."

Mr. Black slowly rose.

"I feel sure you will reconsider your decision," he said. His voice was kind, concerned, almost plaintive. "There is the newspaper notoriety to consider too, you know. I will give you until this evening when, if necessary, you can find me at the post office at six o'clock."

Gazing at them both as though hoping against hope that they might still relent, he courteously wished them good-day and made his way out of the tent.

"And that's that," said Hal. "Thumbscrews and red-hot irons; but we did not flinch, did we?" He was speaking at random; was acutely embarrassed, though not for himself. Poor Nigma! He took her hand and stroked it, while she in a curious stricken way, drooping and silent, kept her eyes averted.

"We could not yield to threats," she murmured at last. "Nobody with any spirit can yield to threats—and such threats! Besides, it would look like admitting it, and how do we know what such a man's word is worth?"

"I thought of that, too," agreed Hal. "It may have been a trick within a trick."

"I intend telephoning to New York and having this

odious thing straightened out," she said. "I have an old family friend who is devoted to me; was on the bench and all that and very important in his way. Please come with me; we shouldn't lose any time."

Outside they were rather at a loss where to go. Ringing up New York was likely to cause attention, especially in a drugstore. They finally decided that the big hotel—pleasantly named the Palacio de los Conquistadores—would probably be the most indifferent to such a call. It was a considerable distance away, but the weather was almost chilly and they were in the mood to walk. As they went Nigma, in little dribblets, began to confide her story.

About three years before, when she was twenty and had hardly more than made her *début*, she had met Fred Tisdale and they had fallen madly in love with each other. He was charming, fashionable, well born; played polo in the international matches; was twenty-six and a dazzling match for almost any girl. On the eve of their marriage he had been thrown from his horse and was so frightfully trampled on and injured that he had been a bedridden invalid ever since. In the glow of her romance she persisted in marrying him, tying herself to a jealous, exacting, and hopelessly shattered man who was beyond all alleviation save morphine.

It had been three years of excruciating martyrdom; she had to account for every moment she spent from his bedside. No slave could have been more at the whim of a cruel and exacting monster. Finally it had become altogether unendurable. Her capacity for self-sacrifice came to an end. She was young, life called her, and she had a sufficient independence of her own. She had made her great decision as she was taking Hal through the traffic to Grand Central Station the night he bought his tickets West. If he had thought her a little distraught that had been the reason. She had no friends, the life she led made friends impossible;

from envying Hal the resolve was suddenly born to go with him, though she had not dreamed of compromising him in this horrible way. For herself she did not care. Nothing in the world mattered to her—though of course she did not want to be locked up. She had talked herself into better spirits, even laughing, and telling Hal she was thankful that he should know at last all about her. That was a weight off her mind; but Fred—and his Mann Act—had ended the last flicker of pity she had for him. It was too utterly malignant. Never, never, never would she forgive him. It had ended everything.

Hal listened to all this with a strange exultation. He did not wish to be locked up either, very far from it, but there was something thrilling in being involved like this with Nigma. He tingled with it, delighted too that it was not the commonplace story of a husband and wife who had parted after a quarrel. Nigma had never been married at all—in the real sense. That was what gave their present situation such a delicious novelty. As a novelist—as apart from his personal feelings—it all appealed to him as thrillingly piquant.

Telephoning across the continent attracted some attention even in that resplendent hotel. Were they quite aware of the cost? Eleven dollars for three minutes? Were they aware that New York time was three hours later than Catalina? The girl, reassured, advised them to write down the message beforehand, as sometimes when communication was difficult it was easier for the operator to relay it. Legibly, please. Recently a gentleman had complained and refused to pay because New York was too indistinct. If only he had written down his message beforehand——

Leaving the operator to get New York they seated themselves within view of her while Nigma, pencil in hand, and with an unhesitating fluency, wrote down her message on a pad. Then she rewrote it, and holding the finished copy

in her hand, restlessly awaited the call. It was not a time nor an atmosphere for any further revelation of her past, though they sat there interminably. When they spoke it was in undertones, the brief commonplaces of people in suspense. Nigma was still smarting. Again and again she murmured it was the most intolerable thing that had ever happened to her.

"New York is on the wire, miss."

Nigma vanished into one of the booths.

When at last she emerged it was with an air so dispirited, so crushed, that Hal had a sense of impending misfortune. It was with an effort he tried to make his voice sound unconcerned.

"Then you didn't need to relay it? The connection was all right?"

"Oh, it might have been in the next room."

Then abruptly she added: "Don't ask me anything until we're out of here."

She paid the toll in silence and then, still silent, accompanied Hal out of the hotel.

"Fred's dead," she said.

"Dead?"

"Yes, two days ago; all this agitation killed him, I suppose."

Hal said nothing. What was there to say?

"That was his hold on me," she went on. "His life always hung by a thread; he used it shamelessly to cow me and torture me. And now after threatening me so long, he has contrived his purpose of making me guilty. I wish I could say I don't care; my curse was always seeing the real Fred, the man I had once cared for so deeply, under that dreadful spectre whose whole perverse pleasure seemed in tormenting me to the verge of suicide."

Her voice broke; tears streamed down her face.

"It is silly to mind," she said at last, when she had

recovered a little. "If I had known he was going to die I would have stuck it out a little longer. But then he wouldn't have died, I suppose, and it would have gone on just as before. I am glad it is over. That's what makes me cry—to be so glad it is over. And yet feeling so conscience-stricken too. Uncle Ralph was so dear about it; he knew what I would be feeling; he was the only person in the world I had ever confided in."

"What did he say about our present predicament?" asked Hal.

"Said he would have all these proceedings dismissed at once; said they were utterly monstrous, and that besides, Fred's death would end them in any case. He was really shocked at Fred's spitefulness; said that even if he had lived, I could not have been seriously molested. He cabled to my mother in Europe and to my married sister in Boston and in general acted for me. He is not really an uncle at all, you know, though I have always called him that since I was a child; there must have been some romance between him and my mother in the old days, and I suppose I was the daughter he should have had—and all that. Like Charles Lamb, whom he was so fond of quoting."

"And very much a friend in need, of course."

"Even if it had been terrible, he would have got us out of it," said Nigma. "Uncle Ralph could get anybody out of anything."

"Our nice, kind Mr. Black must have known all this," said Hal, following a new train of thought. "What a piece of bluff it was! But what passes all comprehension is how he is linked up with Tim Reardon as well. He knows quite well—though in a general way—why we left New York. But what concern could that be of his? Why should he be on poor Tim's trail?"

Nigma shook her head; it was all a mystery.

"Whatever his reason is, I am inclined to think he fol-

lowed Felice here," said Nigma. "Is it not significant that he never mentioned her at all? It is my conviction he is here watching her, and that we are merely secondary. At least that is my intuition. That will be something to tell her, too, and make us seem less—less intrusive."

"Decidedly. It will justify us in a way and may soften her reserve."

"Though what shall we say if she asks us why *we* came here?"

Hal reflected.

"I had better keep out of it," he said. "Your being here will seem less of a coincidence. Probably she does not recollect you at all, and there is no reason why you should not have known me in New York, and then have come out here quite naturally by yourself. After all, thousands of people come here. Then if she is at all sympathetic you can contrive to get me into the picture somehow."

"Easily," said Nigma, smiling for the first time. "By the Mann Act, of course!"

The audacity of the proposal delighted Hal.

"And you must call me Helen," said Nigma. "The other name and everything connected with it is over. We are beginning a new life together; I am having a first glimmering feeling of being free; of being myself and not accountable to anybody. Call me Helen—it will do me good."

"I will, Helen darling," said Hal.

But though she smiled the new Helen was not responsive to the addition.

"No, just Helen," she said. "Anything like darling might bring us within—what did Mr. Black call it—within the scope of the Mann Act."

It was in this changed and happy mood that they returned to Abney's de Lux Camp Hotel.

Chapter XXII

IT WAS with some trepidation that they walked down, after dinner, to the Bon Ton Ice Cream Parlors. They had decided to follow Felice when she came out, hoping her walk would take her to a remoter spot where it would be less embarrassing to reveal themselves.

That interview with her bristled with embarrassments and called for consummate tact. Somehow this last quality would seem to have more scope in a lonely place. Nigma—it seemed impossible to call her anything else—intended to make an intermediary of the dog. Talking to the dog would give the necessary gradations to the talk with Felice. The immediate trouble was their indecision as to which way Felice would go; there were three possibilities, directly uphill—the way they themselves had come—or to the right or left following the shore. Separating, though at such short distance they remained easily in view of each other, they placed themselves strategically about fifty yards apart. It was dusk, the wind had gone down, the almost perennial good weather of the place was evidently returning.

But Felice was late—if indeed she intended to emerge at all. The Bon Ton was discouragingly busy; perhaps she was detained by press of work. Twenty minutes passed; twenty-five minutes; the half-hour came and went; and still they were forced to dawdle in the roadway, wondering if she would ever come out at all. But at last, from an inconspicuous side door they had hardly noticed, a little fox terrier darted out followed by a slender figure in a white polo coat.

It was Felice, her head bare, her golden-brown hair shining. In her hand she was carrying a small tea basket. Without hesitating, with her eyes on her dog scampering in front, she turned in Nigma's direction. Watching her intently, and thinking that even at such a distance what a pretty figure she made, Hal saw her go past Nigma with a light, quick stride. Imprisoned all day, she had evidently more in mind than a mere stroll. With a buoyant air and no concern in anything except her dog, she reminded Hal of a brisk little passenger on a liner, exuberantly exercising.

Nigma turned after her; Hal trailed Nigma; in this queer manner the pursuit began. Content as long as he could see Nigma, Hal often lost sight of Felice altogether. The dusk was deepening into night; the houses became fewer; Felice, following the shore, seemed leading them towards the deserted, rocky country beyond where there was a succession of little bays. Hal commended her choice; though the bays in the daytime were somewhat infested with hornets, he knew by experience how attractive they were, and how little visited. There is no more herdlike animal than the summer tripper; all that teeming life of Santa Catalina was bounded by invisible walls; except for rare picnickers, or occasional bathers, or a glass-bottomed boat showing crouching backs, few seemed to venture very far afield. On that pleasant evening at least, had it not been for the road, they might have thought themselves on an abandoned island.

Still Felice went on; she left the road altogether and reaching a path near the water she continued on her way, skirting the shore. Several times she stopped to throw sticks for her dog. His excited barks reëchoed amidst the rocks with piercing shrillness. Hal took advantage of these intervals to get close to Nigma, though never near enough to exchange a word. Still Felice went on. Was she never going to stop?

A turn in the path revealed a little bay with a miniature sandy beach, soon hidden as far as Hal was concerned by some intervening bushes. Here Nigma relaxed her pace, stopped, and looking back signaled caution. Then bending down she indicated to Hal to follow her. The undergrowth hid everything; Hal could see nothing but Nigma in front of him, furtively advancing. The bay was so small—it was the merest cove—that he assumed she feared to leave the shelter of the bushes. Probably Felice had stopped, and might not be more than a few yards away. Hal wondered why Nigma should persist in all this stealth when apparently they had gained the ideal place for that talk with Felice. But as he crept beside her, now bent and kneeling, the reason for her precautions was suddenly revealed.

Felice was standing at the edge of the water, holding her dog under one arm, and staring through the obscurity at an approaching boat. Apparently it had come from a large two-masted vessel whose spars and rigging could be indistinctly discerned behind it. Though the boat had the appearance of a small motor launch it was being slowly propelled by a pair of stubby oars. Not a sound broke the stillness. Felice stood like a statue gazing out at the shadowy boat and the dark, vague, lofty outline of the ship beyond.

The boat grounded in the sand; there were no explanations nor delays; vague forms helped her over the bow, taking the little white dog carefully from her. Then the stubby oars backed away the boat, and slowly turning her, headed her towards the vessel. The silence attending the whole episode enhanced its mystery and eeriness. Not a word was said, not a whisper, not even a whimper of the rowlocks, which must have been specially greased and muffled. A glittering phosphorescence dripped from the stubby oars and swirled away fantastically brilliant.

Without exchanging a word and impelled by a common

impulse, the two watchers crept down to the water's edge. The vessel was hardly more than fifty yards away—a sailing schooner with her canvas lying loosely on her booms. She did not seem to be a yacht, not trim enough, too deeply loaded. She had a more robust and workmanlike air, and her decks, besides, looked littered as though with freight. Not a light shone from her; she floated as lifelessly as a derelict.

The boat, turning under her stern and disappearing from view, apparently intended to board her on the other side. The schooner remained as lifeless as before; no voices came across the water, not a hail, not an order, not a light. The night was still and luminous, the water like glass; on the horizon the red light of a steamer gleamed amongst stars. The peace was profound; the two watchers, peering through the darkness at that ghostly ship, were conscious only of their beating hearts.

Suddenly they heard a cry, a stifled scream from the dim black mass on which their eyes were strained. It was as startling as an appeal for help which perhaps it was—feminine, quivering, breaking to a sob. Then all was still again, though the silence now seemed pregnant with evil; and the night, a moment before so beautiful, grew evil too. But had their nerves deceived them? On edge as they were and with all their senses attuned to the breaking point, had they not perhaps been victimized by their own imaginations? Had they not been overready to invest some trivial sound with human attributes?

No, they had both heard it; both were positive it had been a woman's voice, both that it was a stifled cry for help.

In a frenzy of hurry Hal began to undress.

"Move away, Nigma; I am going in," he exclaimed.

She obeyed, though saying it was too far—further than he realized.

There was terror in Nigma's voice; he must not go, it was madness. At a little distance she continued to expostulate with that vague figure, now glimmering whiter in the darkness. In any other conditions it would have seemed ludicrous, but at that moment there was nothing droll about it. It was all of fifty yards to the schooner, and what a grim reception might be awaiting him once he got there? Breathing hard and making no reply save inarticulate noises of determination, Hal splashed into the water and began to swim toward the schooner. Thanks to their constant bathing since they had been on the island he was confident of his strength and endurance. He felt at home in the water, and with slow and steady strokes, so as not to tire himself, headed for the schooner's bow where he knew there were stays to which he could cling.

All the while he kept listening; listening for any noise or rustle on that littered deck which he was already now discerning with greater clearness. He seemed to hear a murmur of voices; thought he saw a stir of figures, but he could not be positive. It seemed to him stranger than ever that there was no light of any kind on the vessel.

Slowly and cautiously, knowing how easily the phosphorescence might betray him, he reached the vessel's bow, looming massively above him, and clung to a stay that was partly under water. Beside him was the anchor, rusty and trailing seaweed, hanging ready to be dropped and with its flukes awash.

It was very dark under the ship's bow; the sails, lying where they had been dropped, curtained the sky above. Hal clambered up, looked apprehensively over the rail, and then seeing nothing mounted to her deck where he crept into the shadow of a winch. Glancing from this shelter he perceived some figures standing in the middle of the ship, apparently at the gangway ladder. The power boat was presumably below, and this seemed confirmed by the out-

line of a figure sliding over the rail and joining the others. They were close together and talking in undertones, and though Hal could catch nothing of its import, he had a curious consciousness—a vibration—of a consuming suspense and anxiety.

The voices went on in a low rumble; there was a flicker of an electric torch moving about; some packages seemed to be passed over the side. Hal suddenly thought he could detect Felice, standing with her dog in her arms. A voice said, with unexpected distinctness: "You can't miss it if you keep south-south-east."

Not daring to go to the rail and look over, and feeling that he was at a hopeless disadvantage crouched at his winch, he decided to drop down into the water again and swim far enough out to see this mysterious boat. This took but a moment, and a few cautious strokes brought the boat into view. Its bow was toward him and its only occupant was a man with a boat hook holding to the gangway ladder. Another was descending it who, as soon as he had his feet solidly on the boat, held up his hand to assist someone following him. The other was smaller; smaller, less sure, and apparently hampered by something in its arms. My God, it was Felice!

At this moment the torch, blinking here and there like a firefly, was suddenly flashed on the man's face below.

It was Tim Reardon's!

Hal, in a tremor not altogether due to the cold that was benumbing him, watched Tim, now again a shadow, guiding the other shadow to the stern. They both sat down; the man with the boat hook bent down and started the engine. It hummed hoarsely, and the man, jumping up again and without a word, mounted the ladder and disappeared. A voice above called out: "Keep her to the south-south-east."

There was no answer from the boat. With a little splut-

ter of water under its stern and throbbing with a louder note, it glided away.

Hal followed it with his eyes until it vanished in the darkness. Then looking up at the vessel he saw that her sidelights had been lit, and realized that she, too, was beginning to stir. An engine was reverberating within her; there was the faint spit-spit-spit of an exhaust; he saw that she was moving. He widened his distance, fearing to be sucked into the screw; and then, turning toward the shore, and swimming on his side, continued to watch her as long as he could discern her green sidelight. Her course was leading her to the open sea and almost at a right angle to the direction Tim had taken. Whatever the connection had been between the schooner and the power boat they were now definitely separating with an appearance of finality.

Nigma was immensely relieved to hear his call as he reached shallow water and strode out. They talked, while he continued to dress, and he told her of the extraordinary discovery he had made. Its significance thrilled them unspeakably. Hal was positive it was Tim's face he had seen in the sudden flash of the torch. He could not be mistaken; he knew it was Tim and knew that it was Felice. How they had met or where they were going were beyond all conjecture. And this deeply loaded schooner, showing no lights until she got under way, what part had she played in the mystery?

"That explains the man in the yachting cap," said Nigma. "The man who brought Felice that note which was evidently to tell her to come here."

Hal agreed. It must all have been elaborately prearranged. Felice had separated herself from Anne, using Mildred as a stepping-stone; then she had waited for Tim's letter; then she had crossed the continent and had waited again for him while unobtrusively working in that

shop. Stripped down to its essentials what could it imply but an elopement?

But Nigma, who had always stuck so tenaciously to this explanation, now demurred.

"Why did she cry out like that?" she asked.

To this Hal had no answer save what he had witnessed. Tim's solicitude in helping her into the boat; the terrier under her arm; the not unkindly voice that had twice bidden Tim to keep to the south-south-east. It was impossible to visualize Felice as an unwilling captive.

"She might have been frightened at the strangeness of it all," he said. "Overstrung nerves and all that."

"It was more than that," said Nigma. "It is my conviction that something terrible happened on the ship."

"I certainly had that feeling myself," Hal remarked, after a little reflection. "There was something so hushed and brooding about all of them—an indescribable apprehension. There is always something ominous in men doing anything together in profound silence; it is so unnatural; it breathes of danger. There was not even a word of good-bye on either side; as far as I could hear Tim never opened his mouth at all. Even while they sat side by side in the boat it was in the same silence."

They were returning homeward, occasionally losing their way in the uncertain paths, but guided by the shore that always remained in view. At last, unexpectedly reaching the road, they walked side by side and were able to talk with greater ease.

"What should we do now?" asked Nigma.

"You mean there is no point in our staying on here now?"

"No, none at all."

"I have been thinking that south-south-east can only mean San Diego. It is almost an impossible coast to land anywhere except in a harbor. They must be going to

San Diego—that is, if they are not intending to desert their boat on some beach.”

“I propose that we go there tomorrow,” said Hal, with sudden decision. “I can’t bear not to see this thing through; I want to help Tim whatever it is—whatever he has done. It seems to me that if there was ever anybody who needed a friend just now—it is Tim.”

“If it were no more than an elopement I should feel we ought to leave them alone,” said Nigma. “But there seems something so ominous and furtive in it all—such an air of danger surrounding them—that we ought to try to do something.”

“It’s exactly what I think,” agreed Hal. “That miserable Black, whoever he is, is hot on Tim’s trail. Tim ought to know that; it might have some terrible bearing on all this.”

“Yes, we ought to go to San Diego tomorrow,” said Nigma.

Hal acquiesced. They would take the boat to San Pedro and leave Los Angeles on the first outgoing train.

After walking for a while in silence, Hal remarked: “San Diego is on the Mexican border. Do you know what I think? That Tim has chosen it for that reason. Nigma, I believe he is heading for Mexico.”

Chapter XXIII

WANDERING somewhat disconsolately along the shore of San Diego Bay Hal and Nigma wondered how real detectives ever found anybody in a strange city. They had already been in the town for three days, and feeling that the launch was the most identifying thing about their fugitives, had strolled interminably along the waterside, hoping to pick up some news about the arrival of a strange power boat. With the help of a good many cigars and expressing a vague aspiration to buy or rent a power boat of their own, they overlooked nobody that might seem able to help them.

All sorts of odd people accepted their cigars and seemed unnecessarily willing to tell the story of their lives, for none of them seemed to have got over their own surprise at being in San Diego at all. One of the most nautical-looking of all, in impressive rubber boots, was a printer, ordered by his doctor to lead an open-air life. Another was an Englishman with war medals but scarcely any lungs. There were solid-looking Genoese, with silver earrings; two young American girls who had gone into the boat-renting business; a Swedish aviator, whose blue eyes were much more attractive than his dubious-looking machine, which took people on trips over the bay. This was an enormous stretch of water, almost an inland sea, and not only enormous, but skirting a country so desolate and uninhabited beyond the confines of the town that a thousand strange power boats might have been hidden themselves beyond detection.

What power boats there were for sale—and there were a good many—seldom resembled the one they were searching for; or if at all alike, had unimpeachable antecedents with bills of sale that could not be impugned. They victimized one and spent an entire morning circumnavigating the bay. It was without result, except hearing the story of the owner's life, and how he had come to San Diego.

They got the back numbers of the local paper to see if any boat had been picked up at sea. But none had been. Nor were they rewarded by searching the registers of the hotels and boarding houses. Greatly daring, and feeling desperate, they went to the chief of police, telling the story of a father and daughter—friends of theirs—who had planned to leave Catalina in a small launch, intending to reach San Diego. But he knew nothing, though he was not unhelpful. He said that strangers invariably paid a visit to Tia Juana, the Mexican town across the border. He suggested they make the round of the garages, giving them a list of the principal ones.

"Though it would not be definite even if you saw them all," he said. "There are dozens of cars on the streets that might take people there."

This new suggestion helped them in the most unexpected way.

Alone, thinking he would cause less remark without Nigma, Hal began with a big garage close to his hotel. There seemed to be no one there except a man in overalls cleaning a car. A little corner office emitted the clack of a typewriter but no one to ask his business. The Williams-Fetton Fireproof Garage was as peaceful as a church. Hal, who in all these inquiries affected an air of unconcern, stationed himself at the entrance and lit a cigarette. Such a casual and unhurried stranger was free to ask questions that might seem odd on the lips of one less under the spell of the old Spanish days. Hal continued to puff a cigarette

with an indifference not wholly assumed. It was a caressing kind of climate with an exceptional freshness and warmth combined. It seemed to kiss a newcomer on both cheeks and make him welcome.

A big dusty car rolled in, its tonneau holding two dusty and wind-blown men with green visors instead of caps, and wearing shabby-looking linen coats. The chauffeur was in another shabby linen coat, and from the way he descended and let out his passengers, he gave the impression of being familiar with the place and perhaps employed there. The two men in visors stamped about as though to get the cramp out of their legs, and divesting themselves of their dust coats, threw them back into the car. Something was said about paying. Something, on the chauffeur's part, of finding Mr. Williams. His name had hardly been uttered when he approached them from the rear of the garage where there was apparently a machine shop screened by partitions of glazed glass.

Mr. Williams was effusively friendly, rushing forward to shake hands, and beaming with good will. Had it panned out all right? Had they enjoyed their night in Tia Juana? Had they seen the bull ring, and taken in the gambling joints, and had they found Gonzales? A great boy Gonzales, was he not? Oh, he knew it would be all right if he put them in the way of Gonzales. Incidentally he was being paid, and thanked besides for the dust coats which he had lent them. Yes, the new arrivals had enjoyed it tremendously. Yes, it was a hell-fire little town all right. Yes, the car was most comfortable. Yes, ha! ha! they had brought back a bottle each.

It was all very jolly, noisy, and good-natured; the two gentlemen themselves were in bounding spirits and wanted to open one of their bottles for Mr. Williams' benefit. But he said he had plenty in his office, and tried to get them to follow him in there. But they refused. They were in such a

frightful rush, you know. The taller one announced he had to telephone at once to New York. As he spoke he took off his green visor, wiped his eyes with a handkerchief, and then looked up. It was Mr. Black!

Hal instinctively held himself motionless, as motionless and with much the same sensation as a hunter who has suddenly seen a lion parting the bushes before him. Then he hastily slipped out of the doorway and interested himself in a car standing on the curb. It was the most ordinary car, and had the unwashed and neglected look that most Southern California cars seemed to have—as though they were turned out when not wanted to shift for themselves like goats. But Hal affected so absorbing an interest in one of its rear brakes that he had to bend down to examine it. From the corner of his eye, however, he was watching something far more engrossing than any dirt-caked brake—Black and his friend emerging, each carrying a suitcase and wearing ordinary felt hats, and walking at a brisk pace toward his own hotel. He was now positive he had not been recognized; and with this encouraging conviction and in no little excitement he followed them, entering the hotel a few yards in their rear.

In the big lobby of the hotel the two men separated, the younger one going towards the desk presumably to register, while the other, asking a bell boy where the telephones were, was guided to the place—a long, narrow room, virtually a corridor, adjoining one side of the lobby. At the further end of this corridor was a girl operator seated at an exchange board. Behind her was a door ajar, affording a second ingress to the row of telephone booths along the wall.

Seeing this further door, Hal turned back into the lobby again and strategically made his way round to it. Lolling near it, even pushing it a little wider open, his ears lost nothing of what was being said behind it. It would take

between twenty minutes and three quarters of an hour to get New York, and would he—Mr. Black—kindly leave his name and the number of his room so that she could notify him? He should not lose any time in coming; it was very hard to hold New York once you got it. At this moment Mr. Black's friend returned by the same rear way that Hal had taken himself a moment before, and brushing past him, gave the girl the numbers of the two rooms he had just engaged—414 and 415.

Moving over a few steps to the newsstand opposite, Hal had his back turned to the pair as they came out. He did not care where they went now, his concern was with the girl operator inside.

As she looked up he drew a hundred-dollar note from his wallet—he carried a nest-egg of five of them—and pushed it over to her significantly.

"I want to know what that gentleman says to New York and what New York says to him," he said in a low voice. "That's yours, you know, if you can manage it for me."

She was a pale, thin girl, and her face had the slightly tortured look that always seems to go with the wearing of a telephone head-harness. She started a little at his request, and gazed up at him with pale blue eyes in which there was a glint of resentment.

"Telephone conversations are all confidential," she said coldly.

Hal felt embarrassed. She was evidently a model of rectitude. Pushing the bill towards her, he murmured in the language of the country: "Have a heart!"

She pushed it back again. Such a decided and chilling young person, with no heart at all! Her young face, made oddly attractive by the shining steel bands in her hair, wore an expression of disdainful amazement.

"Take it away," she remarked, indicating the hundred-dollar bill. "You are trying to bribe an operator on duty."

"No, no," protested Hal. "I just meant that if you happened to hear anything——"

Then in his desperation a great idea suddenly flashed on him, though he had no time to measure its risk or consequences. It simply flashed, and without hesitation he obeyed it.

"I am a government secret service agent," he said in a low voice. "You must help me. It is of great importance; that man is a counterfeiter and I am on his track."

His intensity impressed her. It was no lie as far as his passionate earnestness was concerned. She looked at him undecidedly, in mingled awe and incredulity.

"Then what did you give me this for?" she said—of the bill.

"To avoid revealing my identity," said Hal. "You have forced me to do that; you have forced me to trust you; I call on you to help me."

As he spoke, he took up the bill and returned it to his wallet.

"You will be responsible if he gets away," he said. "It will serve you right if he pays you in some of his phony money."

This was just the right tone, its effect was immediate.

"Sometimes you can hear these talks and sometimes you can't," she said, apparently acquiescing. "I will do my best, but you must not blame me if I catch nothing of it."

"But at least you have got the address in New York?" said Hal. "That is worth almost as much to me as over-hearing the talk."

She showed it to him, written down in a book. It was nothing but a New York City telephone number—Battery 2249.

"I was to ask for Mr. Sturgess," she explained. "I wanted more particulars than that, of course, but he would

not give me any. In fact, he acted like what you say he is; seemed positively fearful of telling me anything more than that; acted very queer and short about it like he was frightened of my learning too much."

Hal nodded sagely; it was just what a secret service agent would have expected of Mr. Black.

Then not caring to lessen the impression he had made, he left her to settle himself in a lobby chair outside, well screened by a newspaper. Nigma must have been impatiently awaiting him upstairs, but it seemed unwise to risk any chance encounter with Mr. Black in the elevators or corridors; besides, he had to think, to conjecture, with a feeling that if he tried hard enough illumination would suddenly descend on him. But nothing descended, save the certainty that Black had followed Tim into Mexico and was now going to telephone what he had learned to New York. If only that girl could succeed in overhearing it! But she would do her best. Everything hung on that.

The elevator doors, clicking and banging, announced every descent, saving a watcher behind a newspaper from too exacting a surveillance. Nor were they in very constant operation. The only danger was that the newspaper might prove too engrossing, but this could be avoided by choosing its dullest pages. He waited and waited, exhausting even the advertisements. Nigma came down; walked through the lobby, looking for him; walked out, walked back, bought some magazines at the newsstand and then returned disappointedly upstairs. The elevator doors continued to click and bang; people came and went; the secret service agent had to refrain from looking too often at his watch. Never had a man, seated in a well-cushioned armchair, a more grinding sense of discomfort; and he was racked besides by forebodings that might prove only too justified. What if the girl failed to get New York at all, finding that some wretched thunderstorm in Nebraska

had short-circuited the wire. Or suppose this Sturgess was not there at his end? What then? My God, what then?

But here was Black, stepping out of the elevator alone, and looking very spruce and well brushed as though he had made good use of the interval. He wore his habitually benign expression, and without the least appearance of hurry took the rear way past the newsstand in the direction of the telephones.

Hal again, in great suspense, had to resign himself to a new period of waiting. But he knew it could not be very long; the tolls to New York were too high for any waste of time. Mr. Black reappeared before five minutes had passed, and stopping at the desk to give an order was afterwards whisked upstairs. He had scarcely disappeared before Hal was out of his chair and seeking his confederate, who gave him a significant look as she raised her pale blue eyes to his.

"I got it all," she said. "Did not miss a single word."

Hal made an exclamation of delight.

"Here it is all down," she added, showing him some shorthand notes.

He could scarcely believe it. What an incredible piece of luck! What an incredible young woman! All of it in stenographic wiggles—every word of it!

"I was a court stenographer in Baden Baden, Nebraska, before I came here," she said by way of explanation. "It was the strangest thing how I came to give up such a good position and come to California, but when mother died——"

Here she was telling the story of her life! Why couldn't people come to San Diego without having to explain the whole chain of circumstances that had brought them?

Hal impatiently brushed her trivial past aside.

"Splendid!" he exclaimed, rapturously gazing at her notes. "Better than I could have dreamed of! Read them before I die of suspense."

She did so in a low voice, first explaining that the "Hello's" had been omitted.

"Yes, this is Sturgess, who are you? J. B., San Diego, speaking. Do you hear me? Yes, plainly. Listen, George; a small coasting vessel arrived, communicating with F. H. No getting on board; warned off. Kept watch from a fishing boat. A launch took off F. H. at night from a deserted part of the coast; thought I was up against it as it looked like them all sailing away in the vessel. But instead the boat left the schooner and started towards San Diego, taking F. H. and whom do you think? R. himself! Yes sir, R. himself as alive as I am! Those two, nobody else. Could not follow as my boat hadn't the power. Got a plane next morning at dawn and flew here, arriving a little after they did, but previously notifying operative here by telephone. He trailed them to the Perla di Mexico Hotel, Tia Juana, Lower California—the first town across the border. Followed them myself to make sure; just back; had a talk with R. himself throwing money around in one of those faro dens. F. H. sick, keeping her room. R. arranging to go on to Ensenada by car as soon as the girl is well. As we are now within nine days of the end of our job, I thought it was enough to leave the local fellow in charge. I am taking the first train East to-morrow and will report personally on arrival, telegraphing from Chicago. It was one of the toughest things I was ever up against, George; my heart sure sank when I thought they were off in that damned schooner. God, that would have put us up a tree all right! It will be good news for the client, won't it? Throw me a few bouquets; I deserve them, and it will help the bill. Those nuts are here too, that writing fellow and his girl, but they can neither help us nor harm us now. So long, George, and I am glad it is so well over. Half this business is luck, but you needn't tell them that. Bye-bye, old man."

Hal had the notes read to him a second time, too intent

even to smile at the reference to himself and Nigma. It was a close-knit communication, and betrayed little of Mr. Black save that he seemed a professional detective—and nothing whatever of his employers in New York. But the tremendous discovery was that Tim and Felice were in Tia Juana. Everything else faded into the background. Tim was in Tia Juana! In a few hours they could be there themselves—if they wanted to—and run him down at this Perla di Mexico. But what could be the meaning of that nine days which so definitely limited Black's interest in Tim? But this was no place to rack one's head for an answer to that. The immediate thing was to pay off this girl.

But she would not accept the hundred-dollar note he tried this second time to force on her. She had been merely doing her duty, she said, and all she asked was that he would be so kind as to examine the two five-dollar bills the crook had paid her with. If they were counterfeits she would expect him to change them and recoup the company. Hal, who was in a fever to depart, had to go through with the necessary make-believe, examining the watermarks against the light and scrutinizing the engraving. Pronouncing them genuine, and warning her solemnly not to divulge a word of what had passed lest it might interfere with his plans, he hastened away before she might be tempted to resume the interrupted story of her life.

Chapter XXIV

THE talk he had immediately afterwards with Nigma in her room led to a thrilling decision. Hal had been inclined to leave matters as they were; now that they knew Tim was alive, what justification could they have in following him? He could not see that their friendship was needed, nor was there any point in warning Tim of a pursuit that was so evidently at an end. Would it not on the contrary seem intolerably officious and prying to obtrude themselves on that strange elopement?

But Nigma did not agree with him at all. Ought they not to think of Felice, alone and apparently ill in that hotel? And what of Tim, gambling in those terrible places and perhaps utterly miserable and desperate. It was the time of all times when they should go to their help. She was certain they would not seem officious nor prying to those poor waifs, who she said would welcome them with open arms. No, they should go to Tia Juana at once—she and Hal; now—this minute! Pack up, hire a car and get to Tia Juana before Tim and Felice could go further south. And if they had left already, follow right after them in the same car to that place, wherever it was, that Black had named. Ensenada, wasn't it?

Her eagerness prevailed, Hal being made to realize how welcome such warmth and solicitude might be to those poor fugitives, especially if Felice were really ill. He was glad to be persuaded, to find as it were an excuse, for his reluctance had been due to the apparent absence of any. Delighted, he said he would get a car and start at once.

Where to get it? Why not at the Williams-Fetton Fireproof Garage! There was now no need of precaution, for had not he and Nigma been contemptuously dismissed as not having the slightest further interest for Mr. Black? Hal had not forgotten Gonzales—the helpful Gonzales—who seemed to have some connection with the garage across the way. It might easily turn out that this Gonzales would prove invaluable to them; would know where to find Tim if he were not at the hotel; would help them in any unforeseen difficulties. Hal had a vision of Tim, flushed and reckless, staking wildly in some evil, crowded room at a table where it was perhaps more dangerous to win than to lose. Yes, it would be well to have Gonzales.

Mr. Williams was still in the garage, and Hal was pleasantly affected by his direct quick way of coming to a bargain. What about this fine new Packard? Hal could have the car as long as he wanted for fifty dollars a day; no extras, no fractions, and for Ensenada or hell. Elmer here spoke a little Spanish and could be ready as soon as the car had been filled up. Gonzales? Elmer would know where to pick him up, or get on his track. Certainly Hal had better have him if he wished to see anything of the dives over there. He was a hard-boiled little fellow who could take a gringo anywhere and bring him home unperforated. Great boy, Gonzales!

Much exhilarated, Hal returned to the hotel; found Nigma already packed and waiting; threw his own things pell-mell into his two suitcases and telephoned to the porter to take them down. In fact, it was all managed with such celerity that they had no sooner settled their bill than the car arrived. It was nearly four o'clock when they left the hotel, Elmer telling them they would be in Tia Juana by six. He was a heavy-shouldered, uncommunicative young man in a nobby suit with patch pockets that he filled out like a sausage.

It was with a gay sense of adventure that they took their way out of the town, their hands clasped under the laprobe; and the fact that they were not both without misgiving heightened the zest of it all. It was embarrassing to pursue a couple with offers of friendship; to track them down, animated by the best intentions. Were they not rushing in perhaps where angels would fear to tread—well-bred angels, angels of the world, so to speak?

But if they should be regarded as an infliction, at least they need not make it a long infliction. It was natural enough, too, that they should run across to Tia Juana, everybody did who got as far as San Diego, and possibly their own ambiguous position might have its appeal. To a carping world they appeared to be elopers themselves. The conventions were getting more and more shattered. And this aspect of the matter might not be without its reassurance.

But beneath the surface, Hal at least felt no real apprehension. He could not conceive of Tim giving him a cold reception. There was already too much of a bond between them, even if their friendship had been so brief. Besides, had not Tim been on the verge of confiding in him that night in Idle Wyld? Though the words had not passed, the essentials had. Nor was it possible to think that Felice would have anything but a welcome for that charming, impulsive girl who was so ardent to help her. Their misgivings, thus analyzed, seemed very foolish. That meeting, now so near, grew bright with promise; Hal already felt a surge of the emotion it would engender.

The road was unworthy of the dignity of joining two nations; a mere track, dusty and narrow. All cultivation seemed to stop at the border where an official appeared from a little shack and passed them after a most perfunctory glance at their baggage, not troubling to take the

cigarette from his mouth. The last sight of their own country was of a man cheerfully plowing behind two horses. On the Mexican side all such indications of human activity ceased. It was a vast, flat, and desolate landscape with an occasional cactus to suggest how nearly a desert it was.

Hal was beginning to wonder about their plan of operations in Tia Juana. His first idea of going straight to the Perla di Mexico seemed to him less desirable on reflection. It would involve questioning the hotel people, from which he shrank, and might even mean they would have to spend that night without definitely knowing whether Tim and Felice were there at all. What if Felice had been so ill that she had been moved to a hospital? What if Tim and she had gone to another hotel, or had left the place altogether? He confided these thoughts to Nigma, and after a little discussion they decided to use Elmer as a scout. Stopping the car they guardedly explained the problem to him. Could he not drop them somewhere in Tia Juana where they could get a bite to eat while he went on to the hotel and made some very discreet inquiries?

He listened impassively, but with considerably more intelligence than they anticipated. At a hint of such coöperation being worth ten dollars, he became transformed. A big, fine-appearing man of about fifty, with a gray moustache? And a beautiful young blonde girl something like Mary Pickford, only bobbed? Of course he could find out without anybody knowing he was asking questions at all. He knew Mr. and Mrs. Springer quite well—the folks that kept the hotel. He knew all the help. He knew Miss Stafford, the bookkeeper; knew Bobbie Little at the desk. Oh, they could count on him all right! It wasn't often a fellow could make ten dollars like that in the turn of a wrist. A faint geniality emanated from him; even the outline of his back, as he bent forward again over his gears,

seemed softened and somehow less aggressive. Never had ten dollars been better spent. They felt they were in reliable hands.

Tia Juana was a small straggling town of a disappointing American aspect, and the famous bull ring was no more than a large, circular stockade of upright logs. It looked forlorn and somehow ominous, with a reminiscence of redskins, Fenimore Cooper, and heroic settlers firing through loopholes. The whole town, indeed, looked forlorn, which was due perhaps to the fact that it owed its existence to the hordes of Americans trooping over for drinks and sensations. Its principal asset was its reputation for wickedness, which it had an air of trying hard to deserve. As Hal said, respectability in that place would probably involve you in trouble with the police.

Stopping before a little open-air café where small iron tables were set out under a sort of arbor, Elmer said this was as good a place as any, and would they wait for him there. While they ordered cocktails and sandwiches, Elmer, with a reassuring grin, went on in the car. An automatic piano was started for their distraction. Some other new arrivals, strapped with cameras, and lost to shame, fed quarters into a gambling device. A sharp-featured young man, in a peaked hat and draped in a *serape*, tried to sell Hal some indecent photographs. Vice was enfolding them. Tia Juana was asserting its claim to be a hell-fire town.

But the cocktails were good, and so were the ham sandwiches, and it was pleasant sitting there in the balmy air. They were both keyed up, both felt the shivers of that impending moment, now so near at hand. They talked in low voices, each seeking courage from the other. Hal said he was sure of Tim, said that nothing could shake his conviction that Tim would meet him joyfully. He was less sure of Felice. In the beginning at least, while their reception was in suspense, they would let it be assumed that

the meeting was accidental. This would hold open this line of retreat in case by any fatality they were rebuffed. But with every sip of the cocktails their confidence increased. It was inconceivable that they could be rebuffed.

They saw their car return. It stopped, and Elmer, instead of descending, beckoned to them. He was such an impassive young man that it was impossible to tell what this portended. Perhaps it was merely a lack of manners, for in spite of that last word in fifteen-dollar suits, Elmer was destitute of anything so unimportant. Or was it due to a not unpraiseworthy idea of divulging his news in private.

Leaning over, and in a voice somewhat choked by chewing gum, he murmured that the parties had gone.

Gone!

"Pulled out an hour ago for Ensenada, in a brand-new car your Mr. Mart had just bought and was driving himself."

Gone!

"The young lady was along, too," continued Elmer. "Just them two—Mr. Mart and his niece in a Marmon car."

Hal and Nigma regarded each other with dismay.

"Are you certain it was for Ensenada?" demanded the former—of Elmer.

"Sure," exclaimed Elmer. "There are only three ways to leave this place, as they say—back home, or south, or die. Besides, they asked the Springers about an hotel down there, and how long it would take. Just about an hour ago, with a lot of *serapes* in case they had to camp out, and a cold lunch in a basket."

"Was there a dog?" asked Hal.

"Yes, there was a little dog too," returned Elmer, surprised at the extent of Hal's knowledge.

What should they do?

A question elicited the fact that Ensenada was about a hundred miles down the coast.

"A good enough road, though," added Elmer. "It's new and runs along the sea most of the way."

Again they asked themselves what should they do?

"I am game to go right on if you want to," said Elmer, with a willingness not altogether unconnected with the ten dollars he had recently received.

Hal's and Nigma's eyes met; their resolution was taken.

"We'll follow," said Hal. "Jump in, Nigma, while I pay our bill."

A minute later Hal returned with a package of sandwiches wrapped in a newspaper. Climbing in beside Nigma, he settled himself on the seat while Elmer, without a word, put the car in motion.

They were off.

Both were somewhat bewildered at the swift turn of events. What a pity it was they had not left San Diego sooner! An hour sooner, and they could have overtaken Tim and Felice at the hotel and so manifestly in an accidental manner. Now it would be impossible to avoid an appearance of pursuit. To invade a *serape* nest in a waste of chaparral was very different from saying: "My God, Tim, is that you!" outside the Perla di Mexico. However, there was no help for it. They had to take their chances.

By the time they reached the sea, the dusk was turning into night. The road seemed deserted; on one side of them was the sea, foaming far below them at the foot of steep cliffs; on the other an unending desolation without a vestige of cultivation or human occupancy. It was impossible to resist a sense of danger; it was all so vast, uninhabited and wild, with no sound save the melancholy drone of the breakers below. But that robust and competent-looking back in front was mutely reassuring. The car was valuable no matter how negligible their own personal

fates. Elmer had not shown a flicker of hesitation. The Packard was new and worth probably six thousand dollars. Then why worry to people the undergrowth with Mexicans in pointed hats and with fingers on triggers?

Holding hands, they emboldened themselves with these reflections. They were pleasurably excited, ready to laugh at anything. It was all so mad and delightful to be speeding along like that in such a fantastic chase. Hal put his arm round her, and as she nestled against him all their pent-up feeling for each other seemed suddenly to leap into life; seemed suddenly to sweep them together in a paroxysm of tenderness and passion, so wildly sweet, so dizzying, so unrestrained that it was beyond all realization. Could this be Nigma, panting, quivering, insatiable for his kisses? Nigma, the self-reliant, the delicately aloof, whose smile had always been touched with disdain at the least approach of sentiment? This mad young creature, this palpitating Bacchante with shining eyes, who seemed withheld by nothing! With what ecstasy, with what intoxicating ardors, was the discovery made that they loved each other.

But the impassive back could not be altogether forgotten, though for a few moments it had been ignored in those suffocating delights. Guiltily they regarded it; it had been there all the time, of course; might it not——? Decorum returned, though nothing could dim that memory stirring within them, now all the sweeter in the retrospect. Nigma smoothed her rumpled hair; that silken sealskin hair; moved a little apart; sat up straight. What a coward her conscience had suddenly made her! What if Elmer——?

Elmer was twisting in his seat. Impassive no longer, he seemed uneasy. He was slowing down the car, and several times put his head out at the side as though to watch the road more clearly. Suddenly with a stifled cry he put on his brakes; his hand, grabbing for the emergency lever,

brought the car to a violent stop. Hal and Nigma were almost thrown out of their seats.

What was he mumbling in explanation? It was as unintelligible as the horror in his face.

"There's a dead man lying in the road," he repeated.

Chapter XXV

HIS manner and his quick handling of the gears, showed his intention of backing away and swerving to one side in order to avoid the body and leave it behind as fast as he could.

"Stop," cried Hal, thumping his fist into his back. "Stop at once!"

As Elmer very unwillingly obeyed, Hal jumped out of the car, all his instincts against so disgraceful a flight. The heartlessness of leaving a man like that was abominable; a man, who, for all they knew, might not be dead at all. The moon was rising, reducing their lamps to paltriness in an effulgence almost as bright as day, and giving to the whole scene a strangely theatrical effect. But the brilliant moonlight showed nothing on the road in front, it was absolutely empty. What could Elmer have meant? Hal looked up, and saw him nervously indicating the front of the car.

My God, there was, indeed, a man lying there! They had almost run over him. A man partly hidden under their front axle. A big man, on his back, and with wide-open eyes staring up at the sky.

Conquering his repugnance, Hal leaned over him. Lightning impressions registered themselves. Not a Mexican; blue serge clothes and a soft silk shirt; an oldish American apparently; thick grizzled hair, repulsively clotted with blood, and a grayer, almost white moustache.

With an indescribable emotion he recognized Tim Reardon.

He bent lower, and frantically tore aside the shirt to

listen to the heart. But he could hear nothing. He lifted one of his hands, warm but lifeless; he bent over the face hoping for a breath on the lips, and then started back shuddering.

Tim's throat was cut. His head was almost severed from the body.

Hal rose, sick and trembling, and seeing Nigma beginning to get out of the car, he called to her sharply to stay where she was. She caught the note of emotion in his voice, and stood there as though stricken, with one foot on the running board and the other on the ground. Elmer, huddled over the wheel, was motionless, silent, and apparently stupefied. Hal, taking a step back, told them what he had found. It was the dead body of Tim Reardon. Tim had been murdered. The body was still warm. With a grim gesture he indicated how Tim had met his end.

"I must look about," he said, with an effort to speak coherently. "There's Felice, you know. Her body may be somewhere near. We can't leave things like this, Nigma; we have to face up to it. Besides, there must be traces of their car. Stay in, both of you; but leave the doors open on both sides, so that if I should have to make a run for it, I could get in quick."

To Elmer, still huddled there speechless, he added: "Keep your engine running. We may have to quit in a hurry."

Elmer awoke from his stupor; his teeth began to chatter; he was panic-stricken.

"No, no," he protested chokingly. "Let's get out of this; for Christ's sake, let's get out of this. They will kill us next!"

As he spoke he tried to put in his gears. Hal jerked his hand off the lever, telling him not to be a damned fool.

"In any case we shall have to take the poor fellow's body with us," he said.

Elmer protested, his voice coming in gasps; he was beside himself with terror. It would be their turn next.

Eager for some kind of a weapon Hal noticed a Pyrene fire extinguisher in brackets under the dash. Pulling it off, he passed it to Nigma.

"Shoot him with that if he tries to get away without me," he exclaimed. "Bang him over the head; pull his hair if you can think of nothing else. You mustn't let the miserable hound abandon me here."

Nigma had recovered from her first agitation. Deathly pale, though with her usual composure, she took the Pyrene and got back into the car again. Elmer, writhing in his seat, began to race his engine.

Hal searched the undergrowth bordering the road, and with his heart in his mouth peered about for another body. But there was nothing. Then he returned to the road in front of the car, searching everywhere for any clue to the tragedy. Where was Tim's car? Had the murderers escaped in it? If so it must have been in the direction of Ensenada, for otherwise it would have passed them. Then he turned back, passing his own car, and at a few paces behind it, perceived the glisten of broken glass. It was scattered all over the road; plate glass; evidently a shattered wind screen. But there was nothing else except some unmistakable splotches of blood, and vaguer indications of a human body having been dragged.

Then leaving the road, he walked to the edge of the sharply declining land, it could scarcely be called a cliff, peered below for any sign of a car that might thus have been got rid of. The brilliant moonlight made all the shadows impenetrable. Far below and possibly concealed in one of the blackest, he thought he could discern a car. Straining his eyes he became more positive. Yes, it looked like a car, half lying in the water, and most of it obscured by a big rock. The waves, as they receded, seemed to reveal

it, and then would dash over it again before he could be certain. It was in the right relation to that broken glass in case it had been hurled into the foaming water beneath. But the task of getting down to it would be frightful; almost impossible. The cliff was very steep; the scanty, stunted undergrowth deceptively concealed what a precipice it really was. Yet if it meant that Felice were lying there below——

Nigma was calling insistently. His own name reached him twice, startlingly distinct, and in an agonized note. The pulsation of their car was oddly lessening. Good God, it was a realization of his worst dread; Elmer was deserting him! Running back to the road, Hal saw the car moving slowly away. He chased it in desperation, skirting Tim's body, and shouting with what little breath he had: "Stop! Stop!"

It slowed down; in a final panting effort he overtook it, and with the feeling of a drowning sailor reaching land, jumped on the footboard. There was an asphyxiating stench of Pyrene gas; Nigma was standing over Elmer, crouched at his wheel, in a fury of expostulation. Hal needed not to be told what had happened. Elmer, half crazed, and in a panic not to be deterred by either gas or blows, had suddenly tried to escape; tried and failed. As Nigma turned and reached out a hand to help Hal in, Elmer saw his chance, and shot forward at a headlong pace. To expostulate now would be courting their own destruction; that fear-crazed imbecile might only too easily dash them over the cliff.

Hal was spent. He had no more courage, no more assertiveness. He was incredibly thankful to be in the car again. Tim's body would have to be left where it was. Elmer was too mad with terror to be checked, driving in a kind of frenzy as though their lives depended on his speed. To expostulate with him would be courting disaster; one

cannot argue with a driver who is pushing his needle over the sixties. Hal did not try, the risk was too evident and too frightful. Instead he sat paralyzed in his seat beside his paralyzed companion.

On and on, with that madman never relenting for an instant, and under a moon of desolating beauty! In other circumstances it would have seemed an incomparable night, but to them it was domed with terror. Had Elmer gone insane? Had he become absolutely crazed? Did he mean to continue like that, faster and faster, till at the slightest mishap, at the slightest misjudgment they would end in an appalling smash?

Something at first faintly discernible on the road in front sprang by swift gradations into a car; a car going in the same direction; a small, open car, swerving from side to side in the impetuosity of its speed. Had Elmer seen it? His back, hunched over the wheel, gave no indication, nor did his own whirlwind pace relax. On the contrary, if anything, it seemed to be increasing. My God, did he intend to pass the car? On that narrow road, and possibly fired at as he did so? Had he no conception it might hold the fleeing murderers themselves, armed and desperate?

But the thought simultaneously seemed to penetrate his brain and he slowed down. It was only then they appreciated the speed of the car ahead, for in no time at all it began to diminish with an almost inconceivable rapidity. As Elmer seemed willing to lose it altogether, there was something now grimly ludicrous in Hal's urging him to pursue it. Hal thumped his back; yelled at him; swore in his ear. The car ahead had to be kept in sight; it was essential to keep it in sight; essential to chase it into Ensenada where it could be denounced to the police.

But Elmer obstinately slowed down to a crawl.

"Nobody is paying me to get shot," he said in a surly voice. "And if you give me one more crack in the back

there is going to be a little piece of hell loose around here."

Elmer had recovered; he was his own natural self again, and his face, as he barked this out, was contorted with rage. He was still emitting whiffs of that nauseating gas; the reek of it hung about him like an aura; he kept spitting emphatically as though to rid himself of it. Yes, he was much recovered, almost normal in fact, and every line of his body showed his unflinching decision not to chase the car in front. It was impossible to argue with him, to shame him. To every effort of the kind he answered sullenly that nobody was paying him to get shot.

Then tiring of this hectic discussion he sped up his car, though still at a pace of exasperating slowness, and cut short any stinging comment behind him by blasts of his klaxon. It was abominably effective. How could irony or scorn persist against such an ear-splitting censorship? The honors of the struggle remained entirely with Elmer. The stinging comments ceased. They trundled on in silence, faintly wafted over by Pyrene gas.

It was after eleven before some isolated frame houses and scattered electric lights indicated they were reaching Ensenada. The houses grew closer; dusty gardens appeared framed in white paling fences; lights sparkled, and they had the comforting sight of passing people. The general aspect of the place was altogether American, and it might have been lifted bodily from California or Nevada. Such wayfarers as they saw were indistinguishable from those they had left on the other side of the border; leggy girls; young men in ordinary straw hats; commonplace older folk with nothing Mexican about them.

As they turned into a wide, well-lit main street, which even at that hour showed a great deal of animation and many lighted window fronts, Hal peremptorily demanded of Elmer if he were taking them to the police station.

"No, *sir*," said Elmer. "Not on your life I ain't. I am not mixing up in this at all."

Hal expostulated; such cold-blooded indifference enraged him; every minute was vital if they were to get on the track of that escaping car. Standing, he poured this in Elmer's ear; bullied, threatened, besought him all in the same breath.

"Here's your hotel," said Elmer, as though he had not heard a word, and bringing his car to a stop in front of a two-storied wooden building with a broad, lower veranda completely embowered in creepers. Had it not been for the painted notice, "Hotel Presidente," anyone would have assumed it to be an unpretentious private house.

A second glance showed them that it was in a state of hushed commotion; a group of men were talking in low but excited voices on the steps leading up to the veranda. From the shadowed veranda itself there rose a hum in the same subdued key of emotion. A man in khaki emerged, with jingling spurs and a holster at his belt; then another, similarly jingling and armed. Following them were several others not in uniform, and without a word they all descended the steps and rolled away in a big car. It was very troubling.

"There's the bus that was ahead of us," said Elmer, pointing at a car peacefully standing on the curb. "It seems funny that they should come here to be gathered in, don't it? Wonder if there was a fight?"

Hal and Nigma got out of their car, and were already making their way toward the hotel. It was impossible to resist a certain trepidation; it was all so strange and hushed. On the steps they tried to learn what had happened from the men who were still talking there in undertones; but they were Mexicans, apparently knowing no English, or pretending they did not, who politely raised their hats

and shrugged their shoulders. On the veranda, however, as they stood with some embarrassment regarding a little group gathered about a table, a woman among them suddenly rose and came towards them; a withered looking woman with gray hair and eyeglasses, who gave the impression of being much agitated.

"I am Mrs. Smith," she said, then murmured something about running the place with her husband, and what might she do for them?

Before they could answer, and at the sight of Elmer coming up with their suitcases, she exclaimed in a startled voice:

"Not from Tia Juana?"

Hal said they were, and that they wished to engage two single rooms.

She looked at them oddly ignoring Hal's request.

"Then you must have passed that murdered man on the road?"

How did she know there was a murdered man? It was dumbfounding.

"Yes, we did," said Hal blankly, struggling to comprehend how the news of it could have outstripped him.

"It is horrible," she exclaimed. "They are just sending two cars of soldiers to bring in the body."

Nigma, shiveringly, said there had been a girl with the unfortunate man. Ought not the soldiers . . . ?

"Oh, she is here," said Mrs. Smith.

Chapter XXVI

"HERE!"

The same word sprang from them both.

"Yes, upstairs in bed; one of those men with the rurales was the doctor, just leaving."

Their eyes asked what they hardly dared put into words.

"He thinks he can save her eyes, but her face is fearfully cut with glass and pellets. The bandits fired point-blank with shotguns. It was a miracle she escaped at all; actually the dog in her lap was killed."

After a moment of consternation, Nigma begged to be taken to Felice at once. She would take care of her, nurse her, sleep in her room. The poor child! It was too pitiful. Nigma's voice broke.

"She's under opiates," said Mrs. Smith. "She must not be disturbed, and the doctor is sending a trained nurse to stay the night."

"But please tell me exactly what happened," demanded Hal. This circumlocution was maddening. "Was it a hold-up? Were they robbed? And how was the—the young woman brought here?"

Mrs. Smith, with an effort, became precise.

"Mr. Brunskill, coming down from Tia Juana, ran unsuspectingly right into the middle of it. Saw them jump on their horses and make off, with a packhorse carrying the loot; said they didn't leave a thing. She was lying in the road with the man, and Mr. Brunskill thought at first she was dead, too. It was really splendid of him to stop and find out; she owes her life to Mr. Brunskill."

"Is he here?" asked Hal, looking about. "If he is I must see him at once." He was in a tremble of impatience. Where was this Mr. Brunskill?

"Having a bit of cold supper in the dining room," said Mrs. Smith. She indicated a door at the further end of the veranda.

"Come along," said Hal to his companion. "Let's find him, Nigma."

But she had suddenly given out. Pale and spent, she was accepting Mrs. Smith's solicitous offer of a room. To throw herself on a bed—that was all she wanted.

Hal abruptly left her. She was scarcely in his thoughts at all. He had to find Brunskill.

On entering the dining room he could see no occupant save a child in the corner, munching crackers and cheese. A second glanced showed it was not a child at all, but a hunchbacked man, extraordinarily diminutive, who looking up, revealed a young and sensitive face, lined with suffering.

"You are Mr. Brunskill?"

"Yes sir."

In the sudden appraisal that two strangers take of each other there was a mutual reassurance and liking. Hal sat down; it occurred to him that he, too, was hungry; it was implied somehow that he might share the crackers and cheese and the pitcher of milk. Reaching over he took a plate and glass from another table.

"I ought to explain who I am," he said. "My questions will seem less intrusive if I explain that the dead man you passed in the road was my friend——"

"Oh, I know who you are," returned Mr. Brunskill, interrupting him. "You are Mr. Harrison Curwen, the novelist, and the young lady with you is Mrs. Tisdale of New York."

Hal was amazed; the earnest dark eyes looking up at his were not without a gleam of amusement at his surprise.

"A hunchback has to pick up a living in any way he can," he said. "Not being able to get ordinary jobs, a poor devil like me is a sort of human gull, chasing scraps. Living in Tia Juana and speaking Spanish I have been more and more employed by American detective agencies to watch people there. You would be surprised to find how many there are to watch."

Suddenly he stopped, his sensitive face coloring with embarrassment.

"I hope you don't think I am a braying little ass," he went on. "It—it is such a privilege to meet you, Mr. Curwen; your poems have always been an inspiration to me. That is why I thought I might be a bit expansive about a matter of such personal interest to you."

An admirer! Blessed trade that could raise up unknown friends; endow absolute strangers with good will and helpfulness!

Hal showed his gratification. Instantaneously friendship was generated.

"Bray some more," he said. "For God's sake, go on—tell me all about it."

"The Monteith Detective Agency wired me in code to keep an eye on Reardon," continued Mr. Brunskill. "It was easy enough, though the way he acted worried me a good deal. He threw money about in a very unwise way; once he got away with nearly eight thousand dollars in one house and lost the double of that in another. It was tempting the lightning. Was drinking a bit, too, you know. Pulled out rolls of thousand-dollar bills as though they were shin plasters. Bought a fine second-hand car in the same reckless way. When I saw whom he was buying it of, I trembled. In fact I felt so sure of trouble when I trailed

him out of Tia Juana that I took two men with me with pump-guns full of buckshot. As I said he had been tempting the lightning; your life isn't worth two cents in this country if you start throwing too much money around."

He stopped and meditatively sipped his glass of milk.

"Well, we got the girl out of it alive," he said. "If I had been about three minutes sooner we probably would have saved Reardon, too."

"How seriously hurt is she?"

A tremor seemed to pass through Brunskill at the question; he put up his hand to his face as though in painful recollection.

"Her looks will be gone," he said with a sigh. "That lovely, lovely face . . . ! However, I suppose it is better than being dead."

Neither had the heart to debate the matter; the tragedy of that lost beauty was too sad for further expression.

After a silence Hal remarked: "It was horrible to leave Reardon's body in the way I did. But I hadn't any choice; my fool of a driver got panic-stricken, and if it had not been for Mrs. Tisdale he would have deserted me in the road."

Brunskill looked alarmed.

"Thank goodness, you left it, Mr. Curwen," he exclaimed. "In this country it is a crime to touch a dead body. It's years of prison just to roll it over—to pull it an inch away from where you found it. I came within an ace of leaving Felice Hamilton myself—convinced she was dead, you know, and not caring to take such a risk."

But Hal was too absorbed to waste time about Mexican laws. He felt within him such a gush of questions he wished to ask. The little hunchback was so cordial, so deferential, and there was such an emanating friendship in his dark and hero-worshiping eyes. Never could there be a better opportunity.

"Tell me about that strange schooner at Catalina, and how in the world Reardon happened to be on it? And why did they leave it in that motor boat?"

Brunskill shook his head. His part began when Jim Monteith telephoned him from Los Angeles to intercept the pair at Tia Juana. It was all news to him about a schooner and a motor boat.

But Jim Monteith? Did Brunskill mean James Monteith, the famous detective? That almost fabulous personage?

Yes, that was who it was.

Hal, still incredulous, drew a hasty sketch in words of J. W. Black.

Monteith, of course. Unmistakably Monteith.

"Then, Brunskill, tell me—you must have met him in Tia Juana? Had talks with him?"

"Yes."

"Did he give you the slightest hint—he, the highest priced man in the business—as to how he came to be employed in tracking down Reardon? Whose concern was it of anybody's to do such a thing? Reardon was not a criminal. I can't see any meaning in it at all."

"There was quite a bit of meaning," said Brunskill. "I know—because he told me."

"Told you!"

Brunskill lowered his voice.

"When Reardon vanished out of that house of his on Long Island, he didn't cover his tracks as well as he thought he had. Monteith picked up a clue at Southampton, that town on the other side of Long Island, and found that a man who answered to Reardon's description had bought a second-hand closed Ford car for one hundred and sixty-five dollars and had started off in the direction of New York."

"But hold on! Who employed Monteith to do this?"

Brunskill's voice sank almost to a whisper.

"It is all very well to be wise afterwards, but just try to put yourself in the place of this Friedlander, the head of the Old Ironsides Life Insurance Company."

The insurance company! Hal's surprise was unbounded.

"Here you have an enormously rich and influential man suddenly insuring his life—for the first time, mind you, and at nearly fifty years of age—for three quarters of a million dollars. Then this same man, who is happily married and apparently without a care in the world, sneaks out of his house in the small hours, walks across Long Island, and beats it in a second-hand Ford. When you have boiled down every inference only one remains. Mental impairment. Insanity. And such mental derangement is only too apt, nine cases out of ten, to end in suicide. And the suicide of a shabbily dressed man—Monteith even traced Reardon's buying some slop clothes in New York—and with no home except a second-hand Ford, is capable of passing almost unnoticed. Then where would the insurance company be—on that policy, you know? Some court or other would adjudge that he was dead, and the money would have to be paid over to his widow. Or if they found some miserable human remains somewhere that might possibly be identified as Reardon's—any proof of suicide might be altogether lacking. Then good-bye seven hundred and fifty thousand dollars! Get it? Friedlander, terrified out of his wits, put the best brains in the country on the job—Monteith. Engaged him pronto—gave him *carte blanche*."

But Hal was still perplexed.

"I managed to get a transcript of Monteith's talk to New York after he came back from Tia Juana. He said something queer about only nine days being left. What did he mean by that?"

"The terms of the policy—Reardon's policy in the Old

Ironsides. A customary clause, apparently. If it could be proved that Reardon committed suicide within a year and one month of his first taking out the policy, it became void. After a year and a month, the money would have to be paid no matter how he died. This clause was just lapsing, you see. So near lapsing, indeed, that those last nine days could be trusted to a cheap little skate like myself. I was put in charge of those nine days, so to speak."

Hal mused. Brunskill resumed his neglected crackers and cheese. Wiping away some crumbs from his mouth, he said at last: "Monteith told me he took no more stock in the suicide idea once Miss Hamilton started West. There was a much readier explanation, the convincing one. But business is business, you know, even with a big bug like that. Monteith wasn't paid to advise; he was paid to find Reardon. So he found him as per contract."

"But I can't understand why Friedlander wanted to find me—me and Mrs. Tisdale. What had we to do with it? And bringing in the Mann Act and all that?"

Brunskill smiled.

"It was rather a joke on Monteith that he couldn't find Felice Hamilton—though he knew positively she was in Catalina. As soon as you left New York so unexpectedly—he had had you shadowed, you know—he saw that there must be some connection. It is typical of his hellish ability that he saw a means of getting at you through Tisdale, who was stampeded into swearing out a warrant under the Mann Act. It had hardly been issued before Tisdale tried to withdraw it. He was really just a cat's-paw—was made a monkey of, as they say—and all he wanted was to get back his wife."

After a pause, Hal realized he ought to telegraph to Mildred and Bingy. How was it to be done? Brunskill had shown him so much consideration that he was beginning to lean on him.

"Write them now, and I will send them in the morning," said the willing little hunchback. Asking him a favor seemed positively to increase his good will. Helpfully he produced a fountain pen and a notebook opened at a blank page.

Bingham Stott, Traders' Trust Company, New York City: Felice is here hurt but not seriously in hold-up by bandits. Prepare yourself for bad news of Tim. He was killed and soldiers are being sent to bring back his body, which I saw and identified. You can count on me to take every care of Felice and act for you in any way you may suggest. Address Hotel Presidente, Ensenada, Mexican California.

HAL CURWEN.

Mildred Hare, 337 East 19th Street, New York City: I am telegraphing Bingy the terrible news but softened regarding Felice. She and Tim were held up on their way down from Tia Juana to this place. Tim was killed outright and it is feared Felice's face is disfigured for life though her eyes escaped. A following car brought her on here immediately after the tragedy, and she is resting under doctor's care. You must try somehow to break this to poor Bingy. Meanwhile I shall stay watching developments. Address Hotel Presidente, Ensenada, Mexican California.

HAL.

He passed them over to Brunskill, who read them carefully, asking elucidation of a few words which he found illegible.

"These seem very important," he said, looking up.

"They are," said Hal. "Important and pressing."

"Would it be worth twenty dollars gold to you if I got them off tonight?" asked the hunchback. "There is a big wireless station here, and though I suppose they are all asleep I am certain that twenty dollars gold would wake them up."

"By all means," exclaimed Hal, and thankfully passed over the amount in notes. What a treasure the little fellow was! He shook hands warmly, though not without embarrassment to have to bend so low. Brunskill was hardly more than three feet high.

The hunchback, with a detaining air and with an almost convulsive access of good will, said he had something to show him.

What could he mean?

"I have already been so indiscreet that I might as well go the whole hog," he said, with his oddly sweet smile. "The bandits did not get away with everything; they left this in the road where apparently it had tumbled out of the car."

As he spoke, he produced a small book, cheaply bound in black and with a sort of brass hinge or hasp which allowed it to be locked with a small key. It still bore traces of the dust it had lain in, and had a stained damp look.

"I cleaned it up as best I could," remarked Brunskill, rubbing it assiduously with his handkerchief. He shrank from saying what had caused those stains.

"I think it is some kind of a diary," he added.

Hal examined it carefully. It was locked. Forcing back the pages at the top it was just possible to detect writing within. Yes, undoubtedly a diary or a notebook, and to judge from the lock—of an extremely confidential nature.

"No good trying to open it," said Brunskill. "It's locked all right."

"What do you mean to do with it?"

"As I consider my job is finished I am going to turn it over as it is to Miss Hamilton. It's hers, I suppose. I don't mean to pry into it."

"May I take it then?" asked Hal.

"That's what I meant," said the hunchback. "The police will be putting me through the third degree to-

morrow and it would be stupid to let it fall into their hands."

Concealing his elation Hal slipped it into his pocket. The glimpse he had had of the writing convinced him it was Tim's. Were it indeed Tim's he would have no compunction in reading it. In fact it would be his duty to read it, for he was not only the dead man's friend but was in a sort of way representing Bingy. This soiled little book might be of the most tremendous importance.

They parted with warmth. Hal could be extremely charming when he chose, and on this occasion his expression of obligation and gratitude sprang from the heart. In all his contacts with life he had never met a stranger, kinder, nor a more pathetic creature.

He found Mrs. Smith hovering about for him on the veranda. She guided him up to his room, which was on the floor above next to Nigma's. As soon as she had disappeared he tapped at Nigma's door, opened it a crack, and then entered at her rather indistinct invitation. She was in bed; her clothes lay tumbled about in confusion; she had been too tired even to open her suitcases. As she looked up at him he was startled by her pallor and the contrasting brilliancy and wildness of her eyes.

He seated himself on her bed, took her hand lying on the coverlet and stroked it; stroked her bare, smooth, rounded arm. Then in a soothing voice, as comforting as his caresses, he told her of his meeting with Brunskill and thrilled her with the little black book.

At the sight of it her vitality seemed to return. Sitting up she examined it in mingled awe and excitement. She tried the lock. Tried it again. Felt for some secret spring. Thought.

"The only way is to break it open," said Hal.

She demurred, and then with the same absorbed air she begged him for his penknife.

Opening it, she began in a delicate, skillful way to press and probe with the smallest blade.

"Hand me my bag," she remarked suddenly. "I believe that nail-file would do it."

A minute afterwards, incredibly, miraculously, the hinge parted and the book opened.

In a consuming curiosity they turned over the closely written pages.

It was Tim's diary.

Chapter XXVII

“MINDFUL of my promise to write for my little sweetheart a brief record of everything that happens to me till we meet again, I take my pen in hand though knowing I shall never manage to stay inside all these compartments and dates trying to hold me in like a goat in a yard. Life don’t go in little squares. I shall jump along regardless.

“Well, I changed into those going-away slops at 2 A. M. hoping their late owner hadn’t died of the smallpox. Took them out of the room safe where I had hidden them in a duffel bag old enough to have whiskers that I bought at the same place and gradually filled with clothes. But that money, Wow. We never see enough money to know what space it really takes up. All those hundreds and thousands bulked up like bricks, and by no stuffing in the world could I have carried them all on my body. Fifty thousand only in a belt with pouches. Rest in bag.

“Tiptoed down. Off in the dark, cursing myself for loading up the place with all them guards. None bothered me. Was just getting nicely through the gates when what if old Sam didn’t coming running out dressed in a nightshirt and a shotgun. Explanations. Cut them short, knowing I could rely on Sam.

“Long lonely walk in the dark, carrying my half-million-dollar bag and getting sicker and sicker of it. Hung about Southampton till I thought it was not too early to dicker for a second-hand Ford I had seen standing out two days before marked ‘Red Hot Bargain, \$175, self-starter.’ Knocking ten dollars off the Red Hot Bargain, I scooted for New York. Lived on grocery handouts, kept moving

all the time. Reached Albany late. Shakedown in a decent-looking place. Dreamed of fairer days, *not* alone, with my head on the duffel bag instead of where it longed to be. Gun handy.

"Drove to Buffalo. Red Hot Bargain ticking like a watch. Night at a farmhouse. Began to bother about getting into Canada without means of identification. You belittle such complications till you get close to them. Yet I felt I could cover up my tracks in Canada. Lose myself there so much more easily than in U. S. where every train conductor would be spotting for me. Worried. Slept in garage where good-hearted watchman told me how to work it. Go over the International Bridge in the early morning rush. Bequeathed him the Red Hot Bargain in return for his offer to cross with me. No trouble at all. If you start at six, looking like a plumber, there ain't nothing you can't cross.

"Hopped a train for Montreal, and spent bad evening reading New York papers. Hell—but worth it to get you. Next day made connections with Grand Trunk Pacific. Tourist. In misery all that time with the duffel bag. The man who said money is a curse must have traveled with a duffel bag full. Leaving it for meals and all that. Risk every minute. What would I not have given for a pal? Trusty old Sam if I had dared to take him. Long dreaming days across the plains and Rockies. Always thinking what is she doing now, what is she thinking now, almost frightened of the happiness ahead lest it might somehow be snatched away. But happy just the same. Hurting happy. A girl is the driving force of every red-blooded man. How I thought of mine, dreaming and longing.

"Vancouver. Sleepless night in a tough joint. Moved next day to a sailors' mission. Always fretting about my money, got a new worry. How to get into God's country again after worrying so hard how to quit it. Decided to desert the nice new trunk and clothes I had bought. On a

tip from an old coot who knew the ropes, shipped as a roustabout on the American coaster *John T. Elder*, working my passage and not on the articles. Fixed it for ten dollars with the second mate. Then more worry, horrible worry, torments of hell. How to slip my duffel bag through the custom house at San Francisco? Swabbed decks, handled cargo, and said Aye, Aye, sir to anybody that looked important, but always paralyzed sick about my bag.

"Fixed it up with the chief steward to smuggle my bag through, basing it on my having no proper papers and fearing to attract attention. Dainty treading. Tight-rope work. Dangerous to let him know that my bag had any value. Dangerous to let him think it hadn't. Five dollars down and another ten when the trick was done. To be paid to Jimmy, one of the stewards, who took the ship's washing to a laundry in San Francisco. Never realized before how valuable ship's washing was, and all the care needed to prevent it being pilfered. Jimmy was a solid little fellow, trained in guarding washing. Said the customs men never bothered to give it more than a poke. Privately slipped him a five. Vowed a thousand dollars to Saint Anthony, payment by results. But more terrified than if I had had to fight my way ashore. Leaving my duffel bag like that, you know, deserting it, trusting my whole fate and future to the good faith of those cheap skates. What a fool I had been to go to Canada at all. But it is hard to work these things out beforehand. I was in a cold sweat. And grew colder and sweatier as we ran into San Francisco. No trouble getting *me* off the wharf. I just walked out, though the second mate tried afterwards to hold me up for another ten dollars. Foxy, and with a great air of its being my last cent, paid him three. Hard-boiled young fellow. Will get on in the world. Bound to rise.

"Loafed around half the morning waiting for the ship's washing. Finally it came through on a truck escorted by

Jimmy. Picked out my bag. No means of knowing right there in public with street cars clanging whether it had been tampered with or not. But it had not shrunk, which was something.

"It was two o'clock, the *Elder* having arrived at daybreak. Knowing the place well I took a street car up to the Fifth National Bank. Had thought it over, deciding I would get a better reception in a first-class place than in any of the third. San Francisco hasn't altogether parted company with mining and mining men. Marched in bold as brass. Three weeks' beard, a tangle of hair, hobo or desperado, take your choice. Wanted a safe deposit box. Scared clerk sent for higher up. Told him I was a miner just down from Nome with a sack of gold dust. No, I didn't know anybody. No, I didn't have an address; you are my address, I said. Had I any money? Sure, said I, pulling out a fistful of greenbacks. O. K. Got my box in the name of Patrick O'Hara, and what a blessed moment it was when I dumped my packets of notes into it. One of those cheap little new banks would have run me out. Here at the Fifth National I was on velvet. Greatly encouraged, I opened an account for eight hundred dollars in the same name, all the rough genial miner who had struck it rich and wanting to know where he could find the mint. Quite a sensation in fact. Picturesque reminder of fading days. Walked out owning the bank. Free at last, nightmare over, treading air and hey for a shave and a bath.

"Fitted myself out ready made. Still in the picture as the man from Nome. Heart thumped at finding two letters from my beloved at general delivery. More treading on air. The happiest man that night in San Francisco was Pat O'Hara down from Nome.

"Next job to find the right kind of a boat. None of the few yachts any good, too small, too delicate. Searched around everywhere wasting time. None of them any

good and all hard and troublesome to see. Endless talking. Went to Benecia. Ran up the coast as far as Portland. Nothing suitable. Horrible waste of time and far too much bootleg whisky. At last tumbled on the very boat in Oakland Creek. The 90-ton Tahiti schooner called the *Uahine* under repairs at Johnson & Johnson's yard. Her owner, T. C. Smith, had been in the Society Islands copra and pearl shell business. Damaging her on a reef he plastered over his hurts with soft lead and sailed up to San Francisco to have her overhauled. Then suddenly died here leaving a big-bosomed half-caste widow in a sea of trouble. Johnson & Johnson were holding the boat against their bill, stopping all work, while the billowing lady was trying to sell the *Uahine* and get out of the mess. It was then that I happened along and bought her—the boat, not lady—for eleven thousand dollars. She, boat not lady, was just what I wanted except for changes inside and a new engine.

“Went to live on board of her though she was high and dry on land, held up with props. Took on a seafaring derelict named Paul as cook and maid-of-all-work. Good fellow though pale from drinking too much vinegar. Lapped it down like milk but faithful enough and a fair cook. The Eureka Yard as it was called was a kind of club for all sorts of queer fish coming up from the Pacific Islands, the Johnsons' building most of the boats for that part of the world. Affable in my home on stilts and glad of any break in the monotony I made friends with said fish.

“Late one day when the workmen had gone a fellow came climbing up the ladder wanting me to sell him the *Uahine*. A big German looking fellow with a golden beard. Fine, direct, upstanding man with honest eyes. Sea captain named Krantz, a Baltic Russian born at Riga but of German stock. Formerly had had a plantation in Majuro, Marshall Islands, and a fine little ship like the *Uahine*.

Assuming him German the Japs had seized his plantation and an English cruiser got away with his ship. After ten years of trouble the Japs were returning the plantation and the English government had paid him twenty thousand dollars for his vessel. Now he was on his way back to resume business at the old stand.

"He and I took to each other like long-lost brothers. Splendid man, somewhat younger than me. Beginning chilly and almost telling him to go to hell the next thing was to ask him to bunk in and stay as long as he wanted. We were two of a kind, Krantz and I, ace high though I do say it myself. We decided to go in together, form a partnership, the Ocean Trading and Plantation Company with headquarters in Majuro. Provisional till we got to know each other better on the way down and my seeing the plantation which he said was the most beautiful place in the world. Meanwhile we went ahead just as though everything was signed and sealed, ordering a cargo of everything from Jew's-harps to dynamite.

"It wasn't long before I confided everything to Krantz. Stepfather, stepdaughter, law, public opinion, and how loving each other our only chance of happiness was to sail away and lose ourselves in the southern sea. Like me his own good years are numbered and he knows how precious they are. Showed him your picture. Told him how you put your arms around my neck and whispered this dream we are now making true. Sounds funny telling this to an old sea horse with a red beard. But that's because you don't know Krantz and his heart of gold. Been through some pretty terrible things himself. Had a little picture as treasured as mine though she lies in a nameless grave with a bullet through her heart.

"It has taken a heavy load off me, this joining up with Krantz. So experienced, so practical. It is his idea this of a Kanaka crew though the law compels us to start with

an American captain. Once away Krantz will take command and the other will be put ashore at the first port. Taihiti probably. Krantz is for Kanakas every time. Says to coop up white men on a small vessel is cooping up hell.

"Our first convinced me he was right. Joe Palekua, Hawaiian with a streak of white and a mate's papers. Powerful, burly fellow and a lot of a man, and a smile as warming as a kitchen stove. Jumped at the chance and is overhauling the rigging like the thorough sailorman he is. Next a giant Fiji Islander with an outlandish name now Murphy. After Murphy two soft-spoken youths peacefully named Charlie and Eddie who are natives of a place called Savage Island. Sing and play guitars in rags and tattered silk shirts. But there is nothing they thrive on more than loafing in the sun which as Krantz says turns white men into devils.

"But our bother was that captain with U. S. papers. Several offered but the kind that would ship on a 90-ton schooner bound for nowhere were the leavings of the port. Finally we took on a tall, lanky young fellow who talks too much but otherwise all right named Seth Fowler. He has never been anything but a second mate chosen as he says on the old basis of being able to lick any man on board. Looks it. No thumb, saying it was bit off. Tough boy all right. His captain's papers are one of those war jokes which Captain Johnson says were handed out to anybody with a naked mermaid tattooed on his arm. However, they will serve our purpose which is all we want.

"This, with me lending a hand when wanted, makes us all complete with Paul for cook. Though will add two or three more Kanakas down there once we have ditched Seth Fowler.

"Now I'm coming to a place where I might as well confess and get it over with. Never wrote a word of my journal

till the day before yesterday when we got into the water on rollers and began taking cargo. That promise sealed with so many kisses will have to be unsealed with more. Couldn't manage it on the way and thought it dangerous besides. What if somebody was to read it or it got lost? So I went at it in one piece knowing I couldn't face you without it and how you'd set your heart on it.

"Reading it over I see I have left out half everything. Most of all those letters of yours which made me so hurting glad I could scarcely open them. And not a day without thinking and dreaming of you. And not a night without ache and longing. To stay here when you were so close at Catalina was almost beyond what I was capable of. Had to hold on to myself not to rush down there, but to risk everything now when we are on the last lap and having carried it out beyond our fondest hopes would be craziness. It was Krantz steadied me. It was Krantz who held me back when it was almost more than I could bear.

"Well, here we are this 4 P. M., August 14th, lying deep and everything finished. Crammed with cargo, more lashed on deck, rigging finished, boats hoisted in and bedded, last touches of paint, all bills paid, Blue Peter flying, clearance papers just arriving with Seth, schooner *Uahine* owned by the Ocean Trading and Plantation Company of Majuro, Marshall Islands, bound for the island of Yap, or any other port the master may so direct. Finished. Ready to sail with the tide. Bustle. Everybody happy, everybody smiling. Appetizing smells wafting aft from the galley. Mascot kitten licking her chops outside Paul's door. With a very full heart I close my record, seeing you through the mist with outstretched arms. It has been the longest and hardest trail of my life but beyond was love and you. The separation has been like death. Thank God and again thank God it will so soon be over."

Chapter XXVIII

THERE the journal ended.

Still under a spell, still with Tim on the deeply laden *Uahine* flying her Blue Peter in Oakland Creek, it was not at once that the two readers could consider it with any coherence. Both in silence were trying to adjust their minds to the revelations that had leaped out of that little black book; to amplify and harmonize them with what they already knew. That it had been a love affair they had never doubted since the night of the pair's departure from Santa Catalina, but it was with inordinate surprise they learned that the whole plan had been inspired by Felice. Yet in the light of that illuminating little book how clear it all was now.

The sensitive, imaginative girl, unable to confront a future with Tim that would forever make her a social outcast, had evolved this romantic solution; and in all her young ardor and passion had fired her lover to carry it out. That he should have done so at the virtual cost of his fortune and of everything he had won and valued in life was but a proof he could gain her consent in no other way. His age, the immense disparity in years between them, instead of checking him had on the contrary caused him to grasp madly at a happiness which he knew must be so short.

But there were deeper perplexities in this diary than the folly of an old fellow for a lovely girl who was passionately in love with him. Why had not the pair sailed away on that little vessel for their paradise over the horizon? Everything had been ready, all those long-thought-out plans had cul-

minated happily; the *Uahine*, manned and provisioned for her long voyage, had slipped down the coast and taken Felice on board. Then reunited, and with all their pains and struggles apparently at an end, why should they have so suddenly changed their minds and deserted the schooner? It seemed so senseless, so incredible. What had Ensenada to offer compared to the palm-fringed beaches and wild tropic beauty of those isles of their dreams?

What had occurred on the *Uahine* to drive them away like that? There was nothing in the diary to indicate the slightest hint of danger. A ship at anchor in a civilized port is the safest place imaginable. Yet they had heard that cry—that startling, sobbing cry—and its significance seemed to grow as they racked their heads for some explanation of that precipitate departure in the launch.

“Something terrible must have happened on board,” said Nigma. “That scream had a note of agony and must have come from Felice herself. Never would they have abandoned that vessel, which meant everything in the world to them, had not something frightful happened.”

Hal, in silence struggled with his thoughts.

“What gets me,” he said at last, “is the way they were treated on leaving the ship. There was such an appearance of concern, of good will. It is hard to square anything terrible with those solicitous directions about steering south-south-east, and the quick careful way their baggage was put into the boat. Nor did Felice seem specially disturbed as she came down the ladder and took her place in the stern. Nobody who had just uttered a heartrending scream could have been so composed. Even the careful way she held her dog under her arm showed how calm she was. What we thought a cry must have been the chafing of a rope or a chain. It is so easy to exaggerate sounds at night.”

"Yet they left the *Uahine*," said Nigma. "Cry or no cry, solicitude and all, Tim and Felice suddenly threw over their whole plan for this inexplicable flight to San Diego."

"And it was none too safe either," added Hal, agreeing with her. "That was a long way for a small open boat and in hands so inexperienced as Tim's. One would have thought they might at least have taken a sailor with them."

"I give it up," said Nigma, relaxing her position and snuggling down in the bed. After a little while as she failed to answer him Hal realized she was sound asleep.

Arranging her pillow and drawing the coverlet over her, he tenderly pressed his lips against the silky black hair and then tiptoed away to his own room. He was dead tired himself, grudging even the time it took him to undress. In a thankful spirit he sought his bed, eager only to close his eyes and find oblivion. Exhausted as he was with such a day of emotion it came almost at once.

It hardly seemed a moment afterwards that he became conscious of being roused. A soft hand was touching him, a soft voice was coming from lips almost against his own. He awakened to find Nigma bending over him. Startled, he sat up.

His momentary delight was dashed by the way she shrank from him, eluding his embrace. As she switched on the electric light beside his bed he saw that she looked wan and anxious.

"I hated to wake you," she said, "but it seemed so important I felt I ought."

Ignoring his response she went on breathlessly.

"You must have slept through it, but I didn't. Heard moaning and crying and a terrible commotion down the hallway, and realizing it must be Felice I ran out to see what was the matter. She was in a fearful state, tearing the bandages off her face, screaming and crying while a Spanish nun, who seemed to be her nurse, was almost

fighting with her. But the moment she heard my voice she subsided, and when she understood who I was her thankfulness was pitiful. She was quite herself, that was the trouble—realizing everything, you know. I soothed her, held her in my arms, persuaded her to let the nurse put back the bandages. Her face is frightfully mangled; the one look I had of it almost made me faint. She insisted on talking about it, and about Tim and everything. It seemed to give her relief. I have been there an hour, managing at last to get her asleep again, and Hal—I know everything, *everything*.”

Sobs choked her while Hal drew her close to him, caressing her like a child. Her experience had left her completely unnerved and she seemed thankful to be held in his arms. In the deliciousness of her surrender Hal almost forgot Felice, till Nigma, recovering herself a little, brought them both back to earth.

“It’s terrible about her face,” she exclaimed. “I can’t bear to think of it.”

To distract her, as well as to satisfy his own regained curiosity, Hal asked if she had found out what had made them leave the schooner.

At the question she began to tremble.

“Yes, she told me,” she answered in an uncertain voice. “It was worse than we could have even dreamed. Do you remember in the diary about that captain they had engaged? Seth Fowler—that was his name, wasn’t it? He had somehow found out they meant to get rid of him at the first opportunity, and almost insane with humiliation he ascribed it to the Sandwich Island mate having intrigued against him. But he had bottled it all up till Felice and Tim came off in the boat, and the first warning came when they were in the little cabin and heard him giving orders to leave the boat where it was—not to hoist it in, you know. This Joe something, the mate, came rushing

down to tell them, with Seth Fowler close behind and, as Felice said, livid with rage and his eyes almost starting out of his head. There was a fearful scene, Fowler demanding five hundred dollars compensation and to be landed immediately. Said if not he meant to kill the damned nigger who had jumped his place, and before they could realize it—just as though the words had set off a powder magazine, Felice said—he flashed out a knife and rushed at the Hawaiian. Locked together they tumbled and fought all over the cabin, drenching it with blood and nobody able to pull them apart. But when Tim crashed a bottle on the mate's head in the effort to stop him, the Kanaka tore the knife out of his hand and stabbed Fowler with it through the heart. Killed him with his own knife."

Hal drew a quivering breath.

"And then?" he asked.

"Everybody was for sailing away as fast as they could, but Felice was so horror-stricken that she threatened to jump overboard unless Tim took her away at once—away from the ship. Imagine them trying to argue with her in that bloodstained cabin! She got her way of course; she is the most determined little thing; a thousand Tims could not have stopped her. And that is how they came to leave—in a fever to reach Mexico where it would be next to impossible to involve them in the horrible affair. Krantz said they would be far safer in the schooner; said he would throw the body overboard the next morning and afterwards gradually scatter the crew on different islands down there. He had not any fear about it at all; said if questions were asked years afterwards he would say Fowler was swept overboard in a squall. His concern was at losing Tim. He was absolutely broken up at losing Tim. That was the tragedy to him, and now it is to Felice, who blames herself for Tim's death. Of course it was arranged they should make their own way later on to Captain Krantz's island.

Then they got into the boat and left. That's the whole story."

Pondering it, Hal said that Captain Krantz had been right. Who would have known anything about it, or cared, once the *Uahine* had got beyond civilization?

"After all they had had no share in it themselves," he said. "It was this Joe Palekua who was responsible, and even then was he not defending himself?"

"If only they had stayed on the ship!" exclaimed Nigma. "How weak Reardon always seems to have been where Felice was concerned. Krantz wanted to lock her in a cabin, but Tim would not hear of it."

"Pity he did not listen to Krantz," said Hal. "He would be alive now if he had."

Nigma sighed, murmuring something about the cruelest things in life being the might-have-beens. Then she said she would have to be going. She wanted to get what rest she could, feeling that Felice would need her the next day. As she stole away, not without some helpful kisses, the first peep of dawn was showing through the windows.

Sleeping successfully through all sorts of interruptions—knockings, offers of breakfast, a housemaid wanting to do his room, little Brunskill with a bromo-seltzer, two clanking Mexican officials with spurs and pistols who searched his suitcases—Hal managed to rouse himself a little before lunch time and descended, shaved and presentable, to find two telegrams awaiting him. Brunskill's efforts had been successful, and these apparently were in answer to his own.

Bingy was with us when your devastating telegram came which family idiot without warning read aloud. Bingy in frightful state frantically arranging to fly to Ensenada taking if consenting Doctor Speicher the famous specialist in disfigurements but if not sending him immediately by rail. Advise me

when to make news public Jimmy wanting *Chronicle* favored. Utterly shattered and heartsick send you love.

MILDRED.

Hal nerved himself to open the other.

Not knowing what name Felice is using am wiring this to you and in such an indescribable anguish and horror that I hardly know how to express the love that puts her welfare before everything in the world and asks only to serve. Doctor Speicher the famous specialist promises to go by rail telegraphing instructions on the way. Stop. Please telegraph exact particulars of Felice's injuries to Speicher at Auditorium Hotel, Chicago, spare no expense of any kind. Expect me by aeroplane and do your utmost to light any practical landing field searchlights if possible.

BINGY.

These two telegrams began a day that was to stand out in Hal's memory as one of the most trying he had ever spent. Fortunately he had Brunskill to help him through all the interminable formalities in which he found himself entangled. The worst was the identification of Tim's body and all the depressing arrangements for its burial in the local cemetery. It was no little help that Tim had been a Roman Catholic; this facilitated everything; a gaunt Spanish priest, once assured of Tim's faith, took everything on his shoulders. By dusk, after a special service in the church, Tim was borne to his grave. Hal threw the first clod before the peons bent to their shovels.

It was all forlorn, grotesque, and yet not without a certain dignity. There was so much reverence in spite of the cigarettes, and the intoned Latin seemed so beautiful. Hal moodily turned away, knowing that Brunskill would understand his impulse to be alone, and walked back to the hotel with no company save his somber thoughts. He had known Tim so little yet how strangely their lives had been

involved. So many things had turned on that almost casual acquaintance. It was due indirectly to Tim that Nigma had left her husband; indirectly to Tim that Tisdale had died so opportunely. Poor Tim, conferring happiness in the tragic failure to gain his own. The irony of it! The fortuity of it! Every one of us under the sword of Damocles and thinking ourselves secure!

Hal was mounting the steps of the hotel when he realized he had done nothing about those instructions for Doctor Speicher. His philosophic reflections evanesced in that practical and annoying consideration which could not be neglected. Thinking he would enlist Brunskill in the matter he turned back the way he had come and was fortunate enough to meet the hunchback. Hal wondered if he were not a little shameless in exploiting such good will and devotion, but if it were there, bubbling up like a perennial spring, why should not a very weary man avail himself of it? With a few words of this kind by way of apology Hal conferred on Brunskill, who accepted it as a favor, the troublesome task of finding Felice's doctor, getting his report, translating it into English and telegraphing it to Doctor Speicher at the Auditorium in Chicago.

Returning again to the hotel he was rewarded by finding Nigma on the veranda. She was pale, drooping with languor and fatigue, having spent practically the whole day indoors with Felice.

"It is not like being with an ordinary sick person," she said by way of explanation. "She has no fever and no pain to speak of except when the dressings are changed. The suffering is all mental and her only means of escaping it is talking incessantly. I have encouraged her to do it, tried to keep her doing it, realizing it is her salvation."

They were alone. Hal was free to take her hand and kiss it. Though she said she ought to be going back he detained her, making her sit beside him on a wooden bench.

"I ought to have left these telegrams for you," he said, producing them. "But everything piled on me and I forgot to. Busy every horrible minute. If it hadn't been for that little humpbacked fellow I never could have got through it—burying Tim and everything."

Nigma's eyes dilated.

"Buried?"

Hal briefly told her the particulars. The facts, no comments.

"Read the telegrams," he went on. "If talking helps Felice here are unlimited possibilities."

She read Mildred's first; then, without a word, spread out Bingy's on her knee.

"But Felice has got this in almost the same words," she exclaimed. "I suppose it must have been an afterthought on his part; at least it came addressed just 'Felice, care Harrison Curwen.'"

At Hal's inquiring look, she added: "Sending Doctor Speicher meant everything to her, heartened her in a way you could hardly believe. And when I told her of his reputation and the marvelous things he has done, it was pathetic to see how she changed. The absolutely essential thing is to get him in time, and that is what Bingy has done. The doctor here seems good enough and I suppose at first even Doctor Speicher couldn't do more than he is doing. It is in the healing that his skill comes in. Thank God, he is coming."

"Bingy is certainly a devoted lover," said Hal. "Doesn't that register at all with her? It certainly did with me."

"I am afraid Doctor Speicher was all she thought about," answered Nigma. "Bingy hardly counted at all."

After a pause, as Hal was informing her how he had just arranged with Brunskill to telegraph all the necessary particulars, she suddenly interrupted him.

"I have learned a lot of things that puzzled us so much," she said. "I must tell you them before I go back. All those Japanese servants for instance at Idle Wyld, and Mrs. Reardon's secret visits to that Chinese place we went to."

She stopped, enjoying Hal's suspense. There is no greater pleasure than in imparting surprising news to someone you care for. Tired though she was it animated Nigma exceedingly.

Lowering her voice she went on.

"Anne Reardon is a drug addict—morphine if she can get it or any kind of opium failing that. Tats, who has been with her for years, is her guardian angel. Though his whole business in life has been to thwart her craving, she has always kept him in a sort of perversity that is hard to understand, though less unreasonable than one might think, perhaps. The old story, the good self and the bad self struggling for the mastery, with Tats always there, devoted, watchful, restraining. White servants would have chattered; it was too flagrant to hide. In Paris, Felice says, there were unspeakable scandals. She lived as horribly in Paris as she had in London, debased, shameless, yet in a queer way submitting to Tats, who contrived to keep her from going altogether over the brink. If only you could have heard Felice's stories of all that! And always Tats on her track no matter where she went or what she did, dragging her back almost by force and lecturing her like a child. When they began the new life in America Tats filled the place with Japanese he could trust, not allowing her to have a single white servant."

"I always wondered myself at her having no maid," said Hal as she paused. "The papers made such a lot of that, too; dressed it up to look so black against her."

"She really did make a big effort to reform when she

came to America," went on Nigma. "Felice for a while thought she was entirely cured, and to be fair to her she did not give way again till after Tim's disappearance and the dreadful surmises of the newspapers that she had had a hand in making away with him. That is how she started sneaking off to Dyart and getting opium from the Chinese there. Apparently all the New York Chinese go there too for opium and gambling. Tats grew angrier and angrier about it, and at the time we saw him over there he had just told them he meant to have the place raided by the police. That was his pistol you heard; they were trying to kill him before he could get out."

It was a poor moment for Nigma to say she must be going back to Felice.

"No, no," exclaimed Hal. "You can't leave in the middle of it like that! There are so many more things to clear up. All about the attack on them, and how Tim was killed—did you learn everything about it?"

Nigma inclined her head; yes, she had.

"That was the one subject I let her alone about, Hal, but when the police came with an interpreter I heard it taken down to the very last detail. The essence of it was that they found themselves blocked by a row of men across the road and the next thing was a terrific explosion and everything shattering like the end of the world. She did not know how she got out of the car, whether she fell out or was pulled out. Her only recollection is coming to herself in the road, and blinded with blood, feeling for Tim with her hands. When she realized he was dead she fainted and all the rest is more or less blurred to her except the kindness of the men picking her up. It was only when she came out of the morphine that she began to have any real comprehension of what had happened."

"Had the police any doubt about its being a robbery, a hold-up?"

"Oh, no; the car was stripped of everything; Tim's pockets were turned inside out, the money belt he wore was taken, even his overcoat and the rugs. Moreover, as she told the police, the hotel people at Tia Juana had warned Tim several times that he should not show his money as he did. It was plain enough he had been terribly reckless."

"I am afraid that is the simple explanation of it all," said Hal. "Brunskill told me last night how foolishly Tim had thrown thousands of dollars about in the gambling hells—but to go back to some of our past enigmas. I am dying to straighten out that long-distance call from Boston which ended my talk with Tim that night in my bedroom. You remember that long-distance call from Boston that Bingy found out was entirely imaginary? Did you think of asking her about that? Did she know anything about that?"

Nigma nodded, implying she had left nothing unasked.

"It was a trick of hers," she said. "Bingy was right, there was no call from Boston at all. The fact is that she and Reardon had been wrangling about you all that afternoon, he wanting to confide everything to you and she stubbornly objecting. For the first time apparently Reardon showed some decision where she was concerned, would not let himself be overruled. Finally when he was in your room she desperately invented this long-distance call to get him downstairs again where she threatened to end everything between them if he told you. He weakened and finally gave way to her. Tats helped her of course. Felice is convinced he knew everything about Tim and her and was far from displeased at the prospect of taking Anne back to Paris. He idolized Anne, all his devotion being concentrated on her. He had never liked Felice, nor Reardon, nor living in America. It was all wheels within wheels, you know. Felice says that if they had confided in anybody it

should have been in Tats. She thinks their elopement was just what he wanted."

Nigma had risen, with an expression of finality, almost of impatience, in her face. But Hal could not let her go leaving so much still unsaid. There was a ridiculous tussle to make her sit down again. Nigma was a powerful young woman; that firm round arm of hers could turn over a sixty horsepower car; if at last she consented to remain it was less due to force than to Hal's insistence.

"It needn't take a minute," pleaded Hal. "One more question before you go—how she and Anne Reardon came to identify that body so positively as being Tim's. At the inquest, you know; I heard it myself. That has always stuck in my mind as one of the most singular things in the whole affair. What of that?"

"She explained it very easily," said Nigma. "With Anne it was to save herself the endless waiting before Tim's estate could be divided. Pretending to help her mother in this Felice was slyly working for herself. Don't you see—with the body legally identified as Reardon's there would have been no scandal afterwards, no mystery, no newspaper sensationalism, while Anne, secure with her millions, would have gladly left them alone, and she and Tim could have disappeared altogether."

"But that doesn't explain the bathing suit the body had on," said Hal. "I mean the body at the inquest which was supposed to be Tim's. That was Tim's bathing suit and had his monogram on it. Who contrived that and whose body was it, anyhow?"

"Felice does not know and is positive her mother did not know either. Anne went out that night in the car quite convinced that Tim had been accidentally drowned. The idea of a false identification only came as an afterthought."

"Whose afterthought?" asked Hal. "We don't seem to be out of the mystery yet, do we?"

"It may have been the Portuguese fishermen," said Nigma. "Don't forget that fifty thousand dollars reward." Hal looked dubious.

"Somebody must have put them up to it," he said. "And if you ask me, I think somebody must have put Anne up to it too."

Chapter XXIX

THE next day Hal scarcely saw Nigma at all, for Felice had a kind of relapse, succumbing to a despair that nothing seemed able to alleviate. Nigma's face on the rare occasions she left the sick-room betrayed the misery she was vicariously suffering. Felice's temperature had risen and was disturbing the doctor; it was not pleasant either to have a patient who begs to be let alone, to be allowed to die. Clinging to Tim's diary, the only thing of his she possessed, she obstinately refused to interest herself in anything that was done for her. In her spells of delirium it was always Tim's name that was on her lips in a troubled gabble altogether concerned with her romance. She was such a child, for all her woman's craving and decision. Nigma wept over the simplicity of these revelations, their childishness and triviality. She seemed so unworthy of the magnitude of the tragedy that had overtaken her.

Hal himself had his hands full in trying to arrange for lighting a landing field as Bingy had requested, and to contrive this the first essential was to enlist the governor's help. But the governor was *incomunicado*, a word that by repetition grew hateful to Hal's ears.

At Hal's scathing comments on Mexican indolence, Brunskill, who was with him, mildly protested. The governor had been rousing the whole country and had spent the night in going to Tia Juana and Mexicali to pass on two jailsful of suspects. He had taken Reardon's murder as a personal affront to himself and was showing the utmost zeal and determination. Anybody who could not

account for himself was to be clapped into jail; anybody who ran was to be shot. That was the kind of man the governor was when he was *incomunicado*.

When at last their persistence was rewarded it was to find the governor at his belated breakfast. He was a courteous, soldierly-looking man in his middle thirties, and explanations were made easier by his familiarity with their names and purpose. A copy of Bingy's telegram had already been brought to him—everything of the kind had been intercepted since the murder—and he was expecting Hal's visit. The whole conversation was in English, which he spoke fluently. He had provisionally been considering the lighting matter, doing nothing till the question of expense could be decided. On Hal's saying he would assume it in his friend's name, the governor's somewhat undecided manner changed to enthusiasm. Would the Grulla Gun Club be suitable? The land there was wide and flat, there was a stretch of smooth water adjoining, and it would make a setting of the necessary dignity and importance for such an illustrious event.

Pretending to know more than he did, and prompted by Brunskill, Hal said he thought the Grulla Gun Club would be ideal.

"And of course there will be no charge of any kind," said the governor, who seemed greatly pleased. "The club will regard it as a signal honor to welcome the first transcontinental plane that has ever landed in Ensenada. The expense will come in for the moving of my two searchlights from the fort, getting more by motor from Tia Juana and Mexicali, and the necessary wiring and electricity from our local company. I have here under my hand a brief report made on the subject by my adjutant whom I instructed as soon as I had read Mr. Bingy's telegram."

Was this Mexico? It sounded like the efficient North.

After the report had been glanced at and praised—on Hal's part rather insincerely since he could not read a word of it—the governor, changing the subject, said significantly he hoped soon to have good news for him.

"There are very promising indications that we have traced the bandits," he remarked. "I hope to give you the privilege before you leave Ensenada of seeing them shot in the public square."

He meant Tim's murderers. The gleam in his eye betided short shrift for them.

They parted ceremoniously with the appropriate expressions of esteem. Outside on the street Hal overflowed in praise of all this energy and competence.

Brunskill listened to it dryly.

"It will all fade away if it isn't supported," he said. "We'll use the governor's name and push it along. If we don't push, nothing will happen at all. Push—and hand out liberally. You're game for that, I suppose?"

Hal said he was. Hadn't Bingy said to spare no expense?

The day was spent in pushing it along, to use Brunskill's phrase. Herculean pushing against a friendly but vast resistance. The governor's name was used without stint; Bingy's personal importance was enhanced till it took on international dimensions. Civic pride was appealed to in Brunskill's fervent Spanish; time was expended as lavishly as money—time that was even more precious. An endless, toilsome, exasperating business which at times seemed beyond any possible achievement.

But at last before night fell everything was in readiness for Bingy's arrival. Five searchlights were in position on the field they had chosen near the Gun Club; five searchlights, wired and ready with a man at each sworn to remain there till morning. Forty kerosene flares marked the limits of the field and had been partially soaked and ready for a final drenching before the application of a match. At a

rifle shot they were to be simultaneously lit by a group of youths who seemed to be swelling into the whole population of Ensenada. Two mounted rurales were to keep the field clear. For an improvised landing field in a remote little town it had been very well done considering the difficulties of the task.

After dinner, and a hurried little talk with Nigma, Hal returned to the field with Brunskill. He had hired a big car and borrowing an armful of blankets from Mrs. Smith planned to sleep on the field. In no other way could he feel sure that everything would be carried out properly. Besides, he was consumed with impatience and abnormally conscious of the responsibility he had taken. It was a great comfort to share it all with Brunskill; with Brunskill whose admiration exalted him in his own eyes. All the day's troubles were forgotten, the whole thing was taking on a glorious and thrilling aspect. It was in bounding spirits that he drove out to the field which he found swarming with people; among them were the governor and be vies of ladies to whom he was presented.

Everything was in readiness. It needed only the whirr of Bingy's motors to make it perfect. But there was no whirr; the sky was empty save for stars. Well, perhaps it was all for the best. Later the moon would rise. If Bingy were to time his arrival with that how ideal it would be! Alas, when the moon rose there was still no sign of Bingy. By eleven o'clock the rank and fashion of Ensenada began to melt away. At midnight the governor himself lost heart and departed. The field was becoming empty; there was a general exodus. It needed vigilance to prevent their own men from leaving, the men they had hired and trusted. The rurales vanished, the police vanished, many of the flares had been wholly deserted. It was discouraging to a man who had anticipated sleeping in his car. Hal realized that if he were to close his eyes there would be nobody left.

By three o'clock he felt all his resolution at an end. All his helpers now seemed so sound asleep in their *serapes* that it seemed safe to desert them. Brunskill had been lost to everything for hours. The chauffeur slumbered on the front seat. Hal pulled out a pair of blankets and laid himself on the ground beside the car. The night was over for him. He knew nothing more until he awoke with the sunshine streaming on his face.

It was nearly seven o'clock; not a man was in sight; the driver was snoring happily; Brunskill on the floor of the car, wide enough to accommodate his diminutive figure, was sleeping the sleep of the just. It seemed unkind to rouse either and Hal decided to walk back alone to the hotel and tumble into a real bed. Reaching the town he noticed at some distance before him the figure of a man going in the same direction. A short, erect, but very old man in a light-brown overcoat carrying a suitcase in his hand. A stranger evidently to judge from the uncertain way he was walking. Twice he stopped, looking about. Why was there something so familiar about him? As Hal hastened his pace, still troubled by this vague recollection, the stranger stopped again and turning round showed a wrinkled old face that Hal would have recognized out of a thousand. It was Sam Bird!

"My God, how did you get here?" demanded Hal, astonished beyond measure.

They were shaking hands. Sam Bird took off his hat and mopped his brow as he stared smilingly at Hal. He was in his best Sunday black; a silk handkerchief emerged coquettishly from his breast pocket; with his smart brown overcoat thrown open he looked as spruce as though he had come from a wedding.

"The others were stopped by some formalities," he said in that mellow voice which always affected Hal so pleasantly. "So Mr. Stott asked me to find my way alone to the

hotel and order breakfast. Perhaps you could kindly direct me, Mr. Curwen. It is called the Hotel Presidente."

"But the others?" gasped Hal. "What others? It isn't conceivable——"

Sam Bird smiled amiably.

"Mr. Stott kindly consented to take me thinking that my knowledge of Spanish might be valuable," he said. "We landed over there somewhere and I am afraid it was too near some kind of police station. Mr. Stott will be coming in a minute; he was very much upset at being stopped."

How unconcerned he was! One might have thought he would show more feeling about Tim's death; would have worn some appearance of gravity becoming the occasion if only out of respect for their long friendship. But old Sam was very cheerful; his eyes glinted with the exhilaration of his recent experience; he was pleased to be in Ensenada and had no shame in showing it.

As these reflections were passing through Hal's mind he heard a tramp of feet behind him, the sound of excited voices, people running and exclaiming, and on turning round perceived Bingy beside a thickset man in an aviator's cap marching at the head of a triumphal procession. The baggage and belongings of the new arrivals were being enthusiastically carried by their admirers, who were honored to have even so small a share in the transcontinental flight. Proudly borne like holy relics Hal had a confused vision of *aéroplane* suits, suitcases, ordinary overcoats, goggles, binoculars, a portable typewriter, thermos bottles, cameras, and heaven only knew what all, each carried as trophies and often held aloft.

With a cry of welcome Hal sprang forward to greet Bingy, ready almost to hug him in his exuberance. But there was no answering warmth in Bingy's handshake, it was limp and perfunctory as his "How d'you do." Hal

stared at him in amazement; he was as much surprised as hurt.

Bingy looked haggard and ill, and beneath his gleaming spectacles his eyes were sunken with weariness. The reddish stubble of a two-days' beard added to the dejection of his appearance. The aviator, expecting to be introduced, had to undertake the formality himself. He was the famous Miles Lampson, though he gave his name more modestly without any prefix. A genial, talkative fellow, eager for ham and eggs and lots of them, *poco pronto*. Bingy interrupted this facetiousness by asking impatiently about Felice, and when Hal had to confess he had not yet seen her, he lapsed into a silence that remained unbroken until they reached the hotel.

It—the hotel—was in a great stir; the news of the plane's arrival had already reached it; guests in night clothes were leaning out of the windows; Mrs. Smith, in a chintz wrapper, was inciting her household to a feverish activity. Nigma was there at the top of the steps, pale and intent; her eyes met Hal's in a lover's understanding.

Bingy had also detected her, and running up the steps demanded impetuously to be taken to Felice. Hal saw Nigma demur; caught a phrase or two of her protests. It was utterly impossible. Felice was in no condition to see him; had said positively she did not wish to see him. Later perhaps when the doctor came——

Bingy angrily brushed all this aside.

"I haven't flown all the way from New York to be told that," he exclaimed. "I have got to see her, and see her at once."

There was intensity in his voice; he was unshakably determined; nothing was able to stop him. To avoid a scene—for that was what it was fast becoming—Nigma disdainfully gave way, and saying he could get Felice's own answer through the door they both disappeared into the

house. In the meanwhile Brunskill had arrived, full of excitement, explanations, and reproaches. The aviator, becoming restless, asked what about those ham and eggs. In the general commotion they all moved into the dining room, followed by their noisy admirers who stacked their belongings in a heap with farewell vivas. Like all public honors it was not without its drawbacks. Buttons were hacked off for souvenirs, dirty paws had to be shaken, postcards had to be signed, a smudgy child had to be painfully separated from a pocket barometer. It was all very friendly, vociferous and trying and was only quelled at last by the arrival of an officer from the governor placing Ensenada at their disposal and inviting them to a reception that afternoon in their honor.

As the meal was brought Sam Bird drew Hal to one side.

"I wonder if I might have a few words with you first," he said, indicating that they might leave Lampson and Brunskill to breakfast without them. "It will be easier now than afterwards, and you will understand my eagerness to hear all about Tim's death."

He was so courteous, so pleading that Hal had not the heart to refuse him, famished though he was.

"Come up to my room and I will tell you all about it," he said.

On the way they encountered Nigma.

"I don't know what to do," she remarked in a harassed voice. "He won't budge from the room and Felice refuses to talk to him. I don't know what to do. He seems absolutely mad and he almost drove me out of the room. It seemed better to obey than to have a rumpus."

Hal reflected. Incensed though he was with Bingy it seemed no time for summary measures. They could not have a fight—a scandal.

"I think it has all rather passed out of your hands now," he said at last. "You have done all you could. Why don't

you go to bed and get some rest? Let's leave it to the doctor when he comes; he can talk to Bingy with much more authority than you can."

"It's so stupid of him," she exclaimed. "It's all very well to be devoted, but it is awfully impertinent of him to push me out as though I were an interloper there. Felice hates him. She told me again and again not to let him in. He is tossing what little chance he might have had out of the window. He is acting like a headlong idiot."

"They are both the most determined people I ever knew," said Hal. "Leave them to find their own solution of it."

Nigma gazed at him undecidedly and after a pause remarked that he was right. With a tired smile she turned away. Hal was thankful that she could get some rest; she needed it badly.

In his room, where he gave Sam Bird the only chair and seated himself on the bed, he briefly told all he knew of Tim's death. There was something so sympathetic and appealing in old Sam that he went further than he had originally intended. Passing from the immediate facts he told him of Tim's diary, of all that had preceded the flight from the *Uahine*, of all Felice's avowals and confessions to Nigma. He begged Sam Bird to lock it in his heart. It was all sacredly confidential; to divulge the least thing of it would be a gross breach of honor.

Sam had lit a large ill-smelling cigar and was smoking it with evident enjoyment and occasionally spitting. This accorded ill with his silken manners, with his courtliness, and faded antique distinction in which there was a reminder of an old daguerreotype. When Hal had finished Sam remained silent for a long while, chewing the end of his cigar and apparently lost in thought.

"Tim Reardon was the best friend I ever had on earth," he said at last. "If that poisonous little varmint

Felice hadn't got her hooks into him he would be alive today. Her I leave to God—if there is a God—and to a thoroughly good old-fashioned brimstone hell—if there is a hell. But it's different with them bandits that killed him, and they are going to answer personally to me, every man Jack of them. I have eighteen thousand dollars in the savings bank; I am seventy-four years young; I have killed men before and I will kill some again with a sure trigger, so help me God! You needn't mention it around, Mr. Curwen, but that is what has brought me out here, and I am going to stay with the job till every one of them is underground for keeps. I know this country and the language and the ropes, and I wasn't much afeared of anything when I was young, and now when I am old with nothing to lose I am afraid of nothing in the wide world."

Hal as he listened felt repentant at having so misjudged old Sam Bird. The amiable, smiling old fellow who had seemed to take it all so lightly had concealed a grim purpose within him. That he was capable of carrying it out Hal never doubted. Those unshrinking blue eyes had the fearlessness of an old eagle's. What a glorious end for a long, long life to devote it to avenging Tim! It was superb—epic—and Hal in contrast felt himself diminished to a pygmy.

But now that he had Sam here, alone and so unexpectedly confidential, why not ask him about his meeting with Tim that night of the latter's escape from Idle Wyld.

Sam Bird, nothing loath, confirmed the brief particulars in the diary. Yes, he had caught the old skeezicks sneaking out of the gates and had nearly given him a barrel of buckshot.

"He didn't waste no words on me, though," went on Sam, giggling at the recollection. "Knowing he could count on me he simply stated how it all was and told me to keep my mouth shut. Begging him not to wasn't any use.

Nothing was of any use. It would have taken dynamite to stop Tim that night."

But Hal's question had apparently penetrated deeper than he had expected. Sam Bird, between whiffs of his cigar, was looking at him oddly. He seemed to be nerving himself to divulge what was clouding his brow.

"Has it ever occurred to you who that dead man was who wasn't Tim at all?" he asked.

"It's the one thing I have never been able to understand," answered Hal. "Nor how you and Anne Reardon and Felice could have identified him so positively."

Sam Bird cackled with laughter as though enjoying the other's mystification.

"I guess you were closer to Tim than anybody except me," he said. "My, he thought a lot of you, Tim did. Told me that night if ever I was backed against the wall to go to you. If I should tell you something now it's because of that. It only seems fair that you should know, though it would be risking the welfare of some good friends of mine if there was a streak of yellow in you anywheres. No matter what happens you would never give them away, would you?"

"Not me," exclaimed Hal heartily. "I am not the kind that gives anybody away."

Sam Bird spat.

"It's quite a story," he said. "Which is it to be—that or breakfast?"

"To hell with breakfast," said Hal.

Chapter XXX

"IT TAKES me back quite a while," began Sam Bird. "To the night of a big storm when some folks coming back from New York run into a fallen tree near my lodge at Idle Wyld. Seeing a light they all straggled in to me for first aid, and you might mind their names which I didn't then know myself, as the whole story has to do with some of them. Gus Silver, Jesus Silver, Tony Silver, Mrs. Gus Silver, and her son Eddie who was driving. All honest dago fishermen and clamdiggers except Eddie Silver, who was native-born American and educated up to being a first-class crook. Attractive, overdressed feller with lots of brains trained in a reform school and the College of Get There.

"Nobody was hurt at all, but the old woman was yelping and Gus had a badly cut hand. Doctored them with my best whisky which they thought fine. The next time they passed they dropped in for some more. It led to a business connection between us—Eddie simply couldn't credit it was bootleg at all and he used to stop regularly for small cargoes. Bootlegging was his business, and he had it all fixed up to get stuff from the ships at Sandy Hook or afterwards when anchored in the Sound. Not Rum Row; Eddie was no wholesaler; but on a small scale with the best labels and nearly all of it genuine. Naturally we became very friendly. Crook though he was it was impossible not to like Eddie Silver. He was as bright as a dollar, that boy! I wouldn't have any harm come to him for the world.

"Well, you can imagine how excited they were over Tim's disappearance, and at the reward Eddie's eyes

nearly bulged out of his head. He came to me first thing, bringing Gus, hoping to get some inside dope from me as to where best to start searching for the body. Without telling them anything positive I made it plain that nobody would ever find it—because it wasn't there. Eddie, who was as sharp as a razor, began to put two and two together. 'You don't think anybody's going to find him then even alive,' he said. I said no, I didn't think anybody ever was. 'Tough on his widow,' he said. 'Awful,' I said. 'Won't be able to touch a dollar, left in the air like that,' he said. Then he turned and talked to his father in Portuguese; talked and talked, and finally they both began roaring with laughter like it was the best joke in the world.

"If you would care to come in on shares with us I think we could make something out of this business," Eddie said to me. "If Dad here brought in a body something like Reardon's, do you think you could recognize it for ten thousand dollars of the reward?" "But where's your body?" asks I. "Dad has it," says Eddie, laughing some more. I was thinking pretty fast, suddenly seeing if they took all the risk of such a thing and put it through, how splendid it would be for Tim. Just what he would like in fact. Give him a clean getaway with nobody bothering what had become of him. It would suit Anne too—not that I gave a damn for Anne except that if she identified a body as Tim's it would be so conclusive. But I didn't want to be responsible for their killing anybody.

"Oh, he is dead," said Eddie giggling. "He is a man named Captain McPhail, a former tugboat captain, who took up bill collecting instead, and has hounded Dad and his friends ever since I was a tad in knee pants. Lent money too, at a hundred per cent. a month and then taking their skins. When he died of a stroke three or four days ago, the Armistice had nothing on the way our folks felt about it. He wasn't specially like Tim Reardon except for his build

and height and gray moustache. But I've seen my father bring in so many drowned stiffes that I know what a few days in the water will do to a man. Captain McPhail would pass 'all right.' 'Where do you get him from?' I asked. 'Dig him out of the cemetery,' said Eddie, who still seemed to think it the best joke in the world. 'It is one belonging to a fraternal society that has all but petered out, and is very conveniently lonely on the outskirts of the town. Digging him up would be easier than clams, Dad says. The earth is all new. There is nothing to it at all.'

"This was at two. I said I would think it over, and would they come back at dusk. Went to see Anne and had a pretty straight talk with her. She is a cold-blooded woman, Anne is. All for it, but not wishing to get herself into a scrape. Would not promise a thing till she saw the body. 'But they're not likely to do it on spec like that,' I said. 'Then they needn't do it at all,' she said. 'Much as I hate being left like this, and perhaps having to wait years before some court adjudges him dead, I am not going to involve myself in anything dangerous.' That was as far as she would go, though it was her suggestion to give me one of Tim's bathing suits. He had several fine silk ones with monograms that were supposed to be too good to be left in the bathhouse where there were dozens of the commoner sort. I told her of course that I wasn't going to take any share of the reward. Just pretended so I could string Eddie and Gus along. They could take all the risk and take all the money. On that basis I was all for it. But not on any other—Christ, no! At dusk they came back and were as eager as ever in spite of what I told them of Anne. So it was practically arranged, and they went away with the bathing suit.

"So much time passed after that I thought they had given up the whole idea. Was sure of it in fact, and thinking it was perhaps for the best. I don't like monkeying with

the law, even second hand. But they turned up one night at about eleven o'clock, pretty serious this time, wanting me to get Anne and go straight out to their place where they had McPhail's body in a net. They had dug it up all right two days before and had been keeping it in the water. Eddie was no piker. But I said no. I would go out first with them and have a look at it myself. Then if it seemed all right we could come back officially with the news and take Anne. Fearing she might be in bed and asleep by that time, I telephoned down just saying there was a rumor of Tim's body having been found and I was going out to make sure. Asked her to be ready to go with me then if need be.

"Then I went out to Goose Creek with Eddie and Gus. I have seen a lot of unpleasant things in my life, but that body was about the unpleasantest. It fairly turned my stomach and I realized how true it was what Eddie said, that coroners go more on what are in drowned people's pockets than what they look like. But they were right in saying it had a certain resemblance to Tim. Anyhow, in the state it was in I thought it would pass easily for Tim—and altogether conclusively if Anne and me identified it. And even if afterwards they proved us wrong, it was in such a state that nobody could have thought of blaming us afterwards. Reserving my own identification, however—I didn't want to be the goat in case Anne lost heart—we all went back full speed to Idle Wyld and roused Anne. When she came out with Felice too, I was knocked silly. But afterwards she told me she had appealed to Felice to help her, though I soon saw that it was Felice helping herself. It suited her own book to have Tim thought dead, made everything easier for her. How she and Anne could have brought themselves to do it, however, passes my comprehension. Being so highborn, I suppose; cold-blooded and callous by inheritance.

"Anyhow, they did it; identified the body in the net and stuck to it afterwards at the coroner's, as you remember, I following suit of course; with them to pace me I didn't feel so lonely. And it would all have gone through nicely per schedule had it not been for that goddam insurance company. Poor Eddie was done out of his fifty thousand which he had worked so hard for, and Anne was left in the air, as badly off as ever. However, if the truth were ever suspected it never came out. Who was to bother about a dead bill collector in a deserted cemetery? He wasn't considered enough even to put up a tombstone for."

Sam Bird, who had allowed his cigar to go out, now lit it again. The story was finished.

Hal was slowly turning it over in his mind. In it was the answer to all those enigmas which had perplexed him so sorely. He was somewhat dazed, was in a turmoil of disjointed thoughts. It was as though he had emerged into the sunlight after being lost in a tunnel.

"Who said breakfast?" said Sam Bird, looking at him with his head on one side like an old parrot.

Hal answered that he was more than ready, and together they descended to the dining room; on the way some further questions were asked and renewed pledges made of secrecy.

Hal hired a boat, arranged to have a picnic luncheon for two put up by Mrs. Smith, and at noon when Nigma at last appeared she was invited to a little outing on the bay. She was delighted at the prospect. Said she was so sick of the hotel and everybody in it that she could cry. Running upstairs again to put on a hat and get a parasol and a few necessities she joined Hal, gay and happy for the first time since they had been in Ensenada.

"I can't make anything of those two," she said, meaning Felice and Bingy. "Instead of complaining when the doc-

tor came she positively begged him to let Bingy stay. He might be her husband for the possessive way he has taken charge of everything, and though she seems to resent it she insists on keeping him."

"Does she seem better?" asked Hal.

"Lots," she answered. "It is a disgusting commentary on women; I wash my hands of them. An hour with Bingy has done her more good than all my nursing. I think it is because he is so positive that Doctor Speicher can save her face from being scarred. I felt sorry for him when the doctor changed the dressings. He broke down and cried. Oh, it was awful!"

Hal was affected by the picture.

"That's the kind of love that moves mountains," he said. "Perhaps it will move Felice."

Nigma made a gesture of hopelessness.

"I am going to be selfishly happy with you and forget everything and everybody," she said. "We've been dragging other people's troubles about like tractors towing loads of rock. Let's unhook and fly away like the birds we are."

This inspiring mood continued. They had been so long in a deadening misery that it was rapturous to escape from it. Together; just by themselves; freed from the burden of other people's cares. Even Brunskill would have been an infliction. He had seen them pass with their basket and there was a longing look in his face. It caused Hal a pang of reproach; a smile and a wave of his hand seemed a poor substitute for an invitation to join them. But instantly afterwards the faithful little fellow was forgotten, as everything was forgotten in the elation of it all, and they chugged off in their little boat with an exhilarating sense of guilt.

It was to live ever afterwards in their memory as their magic day. The weather was heavenly; the water smooth

and transparent; the air had a balminess, a caressing softness that seemed peculiar to this part of the world. They landed in a remote cove; swam in that marvelous water; lunched in the shade of a rocky cavern. It was one of those rare moments in life when it is invested with a poetic quality. How madly they were in love with each other they never really knew till then, and in its sweet shamelessness all else was forgotten. Love till then had been pushed aside. The concerns and tragedies of other people had swept them away in a headlong torrent. It was as though they had at last dragged themselves ashore to revive in this rocky dell and to find it a paradise.

It was sad to tear themselves away from it, to snap the thread of those languorous and tender hours which had passed all too swiftly. Lingered to the very last moment they pushed off in their boat, and with its nose ridiculously in the air as they sat side by side in the stern, they headed it for the faint glimmering lights of Ensenada. It was dusk when they started, and night had fallen when at last they arrived and hurried back to the hotel.

The sound of a boisterous party emerged from the dining room, which was usually so quiet. Entering they were surprised to be received with acclamation. There were champagne bottles on the table; flowers; a general air of festivity. Bingy sprang to meet them with his hands stretched out in welcome. Brunskill was there, Miles Lampson the aviator, Sam Bird with his benignant air, and a keen-looking gray-haired stranger with eyeglasses. Bingy, who seemed to be the host of this entertainment, looked very spruce in a dark blue suit, and was incredibly transformed in other ways from the man they had last seen. His smile was beaming, his spectacles seemed to sparkle with happiness.

Might he present his friend, Doctor Speicher, who had arrived earlier in the afternoon? Never had there been

better news in the world than Doctor Speicher's verdict. Doctor Speicher was convinced that with proper care Felice would hardly have the slightest disfigurement. Imagine what that meant! Her beauty saved! The loveliest face in the world—saved! His joy had made him almost incoherent. There were tears in his eyes even as he laughed; in a sort of ecstasy he kept repeating the good news.

Meanwhile room was made at the table for Nigma and Hal, chairs were raced across the floor for them, and as they all sat down the doctor confirmed Bingy's statement with a restrained and professional air as though the newcomers were entitled to know his opinion. There would be no reason why her lovely rose-leaf complexion should be impaired. A few faint scars were inevitable of course. But he was convinced that with proper care no one would ever suspect she had endured such a frightful accident. Though he should not perhaps say it himself it was Mr. Stott's promptitude in sending for him that would make this possible.

"Not that I know so much," he said deprecatorily. "But the others know nothing at all, and don't seem even able to appreciate that a woman's looks are all-important to her."

He had addressed this to Nigma, who was seated beside him, but in a way to include Hal opposite them. Hal listened with delight. He had never much cared for Felice, but his admiration of her beauty was unbounded. That it might be saved was a thing to be fervently thankful for. Without her youthful loveliness, what was she but a brainless, wilful little thing, who was impossible to talk to if one left the obvious or used any words beyond her immature understanding. To choose her for tragedy was like choosing a kitten. Thank God, there would be no harm to her pretty face.

A friendly hand had filled his glass with champagne and as he was sipping it with pleasure and regarding the label with even more—it read Pol Roget, 1911—Lampson suddenly called out to him in mock chiding:

“You’re forgetting the toast! Don’t you know what the party’s about? Mr. Stott’s getting married tomorrow!”

Married tomorrow! What did he mean?

“We didn’t see any use in waiting,” exclaimed Bingy excitedly, taking it on himself to expand the good news. “She needs me more now than ever in her life, and I simply couldn’t hear of waiting. I want to nurse her myself; be near her all the time; have a right to be near her, and make sure that Doctor Speicher’s directions are carried out religiously. Everything turns on that—how faithfully they are carried out.”

At Hal’s amazement, Bingy flushing hotly, became more explicit. Usually so reserved, emotion made him embarrassingly frank. Indeed, it was more than embarrassing, it was appalling.

“I convinced her it was the only thing to do. In name only—nothing else; the protection for her, you know. That was all I asked—to give her a love and devotion without demanding the least return. I have loved her from the first day I ever saw her; if she had been maimed, legless, armless, anything, it would not have counted with me at all. Bedridden for life; hopelessly crippled—nothing could have made me love her less. It affected her of course—how could it fail to affect her, the offer of a love so ennobled and pure? She gave way; she consented. But she was proud even then; too proud to become my wife with conditions she said would be humiliating for me and unworthy of her. Think of her saying that, Hal! No false position, no quixoticism. She said she would try to be a good wife to me.”

Bingy's voice broke; he was much overcome.

To give him a moment's respite which he sorely needed, Doctor Speicher smoothly interposed.

"We are planning to leave the first thing in the morning," he said. "Mr. Stott is arranging to get married at Los Angeles and then go on to New York in a private car he has reserved. As the sole executor, in conjunction with his bank, of Mr. Reardon's estate he will have a largely augmented income which will permit him such luxuries. Perhaps I may be classed with them as he very kindly desires me to accompany him, taking a trained nurse with me."

"Yes, that's right," exclaimed Bingy, who with the help of another glass of champagne had somewhat noisily recovered. "And say, Hal, it is an open invitation for you and Mrs. Tisdale if you will both honor us. What Felice thinks of Mrs. Tisdale is beyond any expression of mine; said in a thousand years she never could repay either of you for what you have done."

Laughingly he added: "Get married with us tomorrow. Oh, you needn't pretend you haven't your own romance! Why not help me through with it? Stand by us both to the end. How about it, Hal?"

A double wedding! The idea was acclaimed. Lampson, who had drunk too much, was vociferous about it.

Trying to conceal his distaste under a very forced smile Hal said it was hardly for him to say. Nigma opposite looked downright angry. Her dark eyes flashed and there was the faintest quiver of her nostrils. Anger became her. With her head thrown back, and her fine bosom outlined under her thin dress, she looked handsomer than Hal had ever seen her before. Not that he was specially happy about it; it had ominous portents.

To his great relief she answered with an amiability as forced as his own that she would have to think about it.

A double marriage—like doubles at tennis; a foursome in fact; but why stop there? Bingy should invite the whole table to get married—everybody there, including Mr. Bird. Make it something for Los Angeles to remember, with a brass band and another private car! Thus parrying Bingy, whose persistence was drowned in the general laughter caused by her remark, she rose from her place and said if she might be excused a moment she would run up and see Felice. The poor child hadn't a rag to her name, and if she were to get off in the morning something would have to be improvised from her own things. With that she was off and almost out of the door before Hal could follow her, which he did with very scant excuses.

He overtook her on the veranda, and together they went on slowly toward the stairway.

"It was splendid of you to take it like that," said Hal. "Not to let Bingy's idiocy ruffle you and spoil the party. He is so worked up he hardly knows what he is saying."

"It wasn't for Bingy's sake, it was for my own," she returned. "Our happy, happy day—it would be intolerable to mar it by a single unpleasant memory! It had to be kept complete to the end in all its tenderness, untarnished by anything. But it was not easy, Hal. Bingy was vulgarizing it—vulgarizing us as though we were all Tyrolean peasants in a wayside wine shop. He was unbearable."

Hal agreed with her; it was impossible to defend Bingy.

"Though you saw him at a dreadful disadvantage," he went on. "He is entitled to have lost his head, I suppose. Who could have thought that Felice would have given way like that!"

The resentment died out of Nigma's face.

"Perhaps she saw it was the only solution," she said. "What future could she have otherwise—a poor little bird with a broken wing? And I have to admit Bingy was very fine about it, superb really, in asking nothing. Crushed and

humbled as she is I can see how she brought herself to do it. It makes me sorry for the poor kid; I am going up to encourage her. Get them to put by something for me to eat; I shall come down afterward and have it in peace with you."

Hal accompanied her down the dark and deserted hall to Felice's door. He held out his arms and she nestled into them with a little sigh, holding up her face for kisses and murmuring about their lovely day, their perfect, perfect day, with a melting significance that made his pulses throb.

"Let's take Bingy at his word," said Hal as she finally drew herself away and laid her hand on the knob of the door. "It would be as well there as anywhere, and how much nicer it would make the private car for us."

Smiling archly she said she would think about it.

"Bingy will kiss me and you will have to kiss Felice, and it will all be very Tyrolean," she said. "But if the boy wants it he shall have it."

With that she opened the door and slipped into Felice's room leaving Hal to return to his interrupted dinner.

Conclusion

BUT there was no double wedding the next day in Los Angeles. Hal and Nigma got married at the City Hall very simply and quickly. Bingy and Felice were married with greater ceremony in their hotel sitting room with an officiating clergyman. It was not without its pathos. The next day the little party left in the private car for New York taking Brunskill as well. Bingy felt he needed him for the arrangements that would have to be made for moving Tim's body. As a matter of fact it was never moved and was left to lie undisturbed under a simple stone bearing his name.

Sam Bird remained for a while in Ensenada and then was altogether lost sight of; no one knew what became of him. Months afterward Bingy heard briefly from Brunskill that one of the murderers had been apprehended and shot in Ensenada, but there was no mention of Sam.

It was on the Grand Canal in Venice that news of old Sam finally emerged from the mist. Hal and Nigma had come over from the Lido where they were staying to get their accumulated letters at the American Consulate. As they were glancing through them in their gondola, Hal to his surprise discovered one from Sam Bird, addressed to him in the care of his publishers. It was written on ruled paper and in an old-fashioned sloping hand.

Antotonilco,
State of Jalisco,
Mexico.

DEAR AND HONORED FRIEND:

Coming across an old book of yours and feeling you almost talking through it, I take my pen in hand to beg you for a very

great favor. If it should not be too troublesome or expensive, I should be very glad to get Snagge's *Refractory Ores*, Bentham's *Cyanide Processes*, and McClintock's *Base Metal Ores with Silver Contents*. If you could add to this a year's subscription to the *Saturday Evening Post* you would gladden an old fellow's heart.

I ought to have begun by saying that I am in jail here for what they are pleased to call life. At seventy-five this makes me think the joke is rather on them. There were four implicated in Tim's taking-off, Pedro Garza, José Maria Etcheveria, Emilio de Santos, and a man called Victoriano Eguino. It was their passing Tim's hundred-dollar notes that always gave me a trail. Pedro Garza was took in Tia Juana and I had him nicely tried and shot. Etcheveria was killed resisting arrest in Guaymas. Emilio de Santos, who was with him, managed to escape across the border. There I had to spend nearly all my money getting him extradited, but he beat me in the end by hanging himself in prison. Victoriano cost me a weary chase. I thought I would never get that fellow. He was stingy with his hundred-dollar notes, wily as they make them, and was always getting hopelessly lost. But I stuck after him like a bird dog. Ran him down and plugged him finally in this town with three bullets right through him. That is how I got in here for life.

But I would not like you to feel sorry for me. I am quite a pet of the Comandante's and have my meals at his table as well as teaching his boys mineralogy and mining. The class has now grown to six and we take long pleasant rambles, chipping rocks. They think a lot of me and I feel I am getting some of it on false pretenses. That is why I would like those books which would be a big help.

I chose you instead of Mr. Stott because it would be just like him to get busy and get me out of jail. But I am as happy here as anywhere and would rather be let alone, hating to change and with no place to go to. I hope all is well in that quarter. Mr. Stott is a very fine man though I think he cheapened himself with all that devotion. I hope you are happy with your own pretty wife. Though nobody much agreed with me I thought

she was a far handsomer woman than little Felice. I would like to be remembered to her. This is all for the present and I close with cordial wishes.

Respectfully yours,

SAMUEL BIRD.

THE END

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